

DECOLONIZING THE CLASSROOM:  
READING ABORIGINAL LITERATURE THROUGH THE LENSES OF CONTEMPORARY  
LITERARY THEORIES

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explored the potential for decolonizing the secondary English Language Arts classroom. An interdisciplinary approach was used to explore contemporary theories of literary criticism relevant to the study of Aboriginal literature, including an approach through colonial and post-colonial discourse and the growing body of theory and criticism written by North American Aboriginals; to incorporate literary theory and pedagogical knowledge of content into the development of Aboriginal literature units FOR secondary school classrooms; and to incorporate these new interpretive and pedagogical understandings into the practices of two secondary English teachers using North American Aboriginal literature in their classrooms.

A document was prepared that explored the interpretive potentials of postcolonial and Aboriginal literary theories and given to the two participating teachers who were able to use this information to develop instructional units for their literature classes. Action research framed the approach used to implement, revise, and evaluate the units of study in the two grade twelve classrooms.

The participating teachers found that the critical lenses enabled them to approach Aboriginal literature with more confidence and insight. They also found that their classroom use of Aboriginal literature disclosed the misconceptions their students held concerning Aboriginal peoples. The teachers were frustrated by the systemic racism evident in their classrooms. They were also frustrated by the resistance shown by their

teaching peers toward incorporating Aboriginal literature and anti-racist methodologies into their instruction.

The findings of this study suggest that more exposure to critical literary theories and minority literatures in the context of teachers' pre-service and in-service education may help to decolonize Canadian classrooms.

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## **DEDICATION**

To the students of Canada's Arctic whose need to hear  
their stories planted the seeds for this research

To Gordon, Alina, and Kerstin whose faith in me gave me  
faith in myself

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **PREPARING THE GROUND**

#### **Beginnings**

On a Thursday afternoon in January, 1987, I stepped out of a Lockheed Electra aircraft into the midwinter dark of a small, Inuit settlement. The following day I toured the community of Holman and the school, and, on Monday, I began teaching kindergarten. I came to the Northwest Territories as a new teacher, well educated and well traveled, ready for a new adventure. My husband and I had planned to spend a year in Canada's north before embarking on another adventure. Instead, we spent the next fourteen years in two small Inuit communities, far north of the Arctic Circle, discovering that we were not as well traveled or as well educated as we had thought. As a teacher and administrator in schools whose populations were 99 per cent Inuit, I was challenged to rethink my own education as I attempted to address the educational needs of my students.

Canada's north is a land of challenges – geographic, social, and economic. In 1987, the Northwest Territories (NWT) encompassed one-third of Canada's landmass, stretching over three time zones from Greenland in the East to the Yukon Territory in the west. Approximately 60,000 individuals sparsely populated this massive expanse of land, a

population that could fit into Toronto's Skydome. These 60,000 individuals were clustered in scattered settlements ranging in size from several hundred to several thousand. Almost one-third of the population lived in Yellowknife, the capital city and economic centre. For residents of western arctic communities, Yellowknife was a metropolis complete with department stores, restaurants and bars, and marvels like elevators. The population of the NWT prior to division<sup>1</sup> was comprised of three main cultural groups: the Inuit and the Dene, who were the traditional inhabitants of the land, and the southerners, those people who had moved north from the provinces for employment with the government or in the resource sector. Historically, the Inuit had lived a nomadic existence north of the tree line, and they had only recently moved from the land into permanent settlements. It was to one of these settlements, the sixth most northerly community in Canada, that we moved and where I first began to teach.

I felt confident in my ability to teach. I had been a successful student, had read widely, and had travelled extensively, all things that I thought would make me a good teacher. Because I had grown up on a farm in Saskatchewan and attended school in a small rural hamlet, living in a small, isolated community was nothing new. I had survived my childhood by discovering the world through books and learning to live in the imagined worlds of others. I had left home after grade ten to complete my high school education at a boarding school in another small Saskatchewan town, and from there I traveled to Ontario to attend university. After having lived in the Canadian cities of Waterloo, Vancouver, and Toronto as well as several small towns in Switzerland and Germany and having completed a Bachelor of Arts, a Master of Arts, and a Bachelor of Education, I

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<sup>1</sup> In 1999 the Northwest Territories was divided into two political jurisdictions, the NWT and Nunavut.

was ready for my first classroom as a teacher. I assumed that my students would not be very different from children I had worked with in southern Canada and in Europe. As I soon realized, my re-education was about to begin.

Schooling was a relatively new phenomenon in northern communities. Although I came from generations of schooled ancestors, my students were sometimes the first, usually the second generation to experience schooling. Their parents had been born in tents and iglus and traveled with their families between the seasonal hunting and fishing camps; my students were born in the hospital in Yellowknife and made weekend hunting and fishing trips. Their grandparents had never been to school, spoke Innuinaqtun, and understood the land; their parents had attended residential schools, spoke English and Innuinaqtun, and were learning to balance wage economies with traditional pursuits; my students attended the local school through grade nine when they went to school in Yellowknife, spoke English, and loved television and junk food. My classroom and those of my peers, all educated southerners, were foreign environments to our students, and teachers and students struggled to find success in this most familiar and most foreign of environments.

I had assumed that my students would understand life through story, but works of literature that had engaged me as a reader fell flat when I introduced them to my students. I read in ever expanding circles as I searched for literature and methodological approaches that would resonate with my students. My search for connections intensified, given impetus by my frustration with Eurocentric approaches.

My initial years of teaching were spent in an elementary school, teaching a range of grades. As I struggled to discover who I was as a teacher in this remote settlement, my students struggled to succeed in an educational system that did not reflect the traditional learning practices of the Inuit. My approaches to teaching sometimes failed to reach my audience, and I wondered what I was doing wrong and why the students did not seem to learn. I later learned that my southern teaching style contradicted traditional learning styles:

In the traditional Inuit lifestyle, education was not separated from day-to-day living. It was not something you studied, it was something you did. The essence of education was getting ready to assume adult life roles. The pace varied with each child – there were no set ages for acquiring skills or precise paths that had to be followed. A child began to learn a skill when he or she began to pay attention, to notice how an adult did something and to try to imitate those actions. (Vick-Westgate, 2002, p. 41)

My passion for education was frustrated by my students' seeming inability to recognize the importance of education as I understood it. With time and as I became a part of the community, I began to understand that perhaps the school system rather than the traditional Inuit learning styles needed changing.

Although I was trapped by the school year imposed upon us, I began to discover that learning occurred in many places and through many sources. Teaching in a small school with few teachers meant that I shared a classroom with many of the same children for several years. Together we explored ways of bringing the classroom and the community closer together. The Northwest Territories' elementary school curricula were designed with flexibility in mind and links to local knowledge were easily accommodated once I recognized their importance. Together with students, parents, my colleagues, and other

community members, we were able to provide schooling that did not alienate the child from the community.

After seven years, I left this community and moved my family to a larger centre that had one of the new regional high schools. Until 1992, students in our region had had to leave the community after completing grade nine to pursue their high school studies in Yellowknife. A variety of factors, homesickness and alienation among them, contributed to a high drop-out rate; few students who left for grade ten stayed to finish grade twelve. Parents, teachers, and government officials hoped that establishing regional and eventually local high schools would lead to an increase in the number of high school graduates. I came on staff in the second year of the high school implementation as grade eleven was added to the local school.

I was enthusiastic about bringing my understandings of holistic education from the elementary school to the high school as I began teaching secondary English. Suddenly, I was no longer in a one-teacher, one-classroom situation but had again become a subject specialist, seeing students for an hour at a time, once or twice a day. The long-term relationships that I had established with parents and students that enabled me to rework the curriculum were replaced with new relationships and a new curriculum. Although the NWT curricula encouraged holistic teaching, the Alberta curricula, used for grades ten through twelve, centred on subject expertise.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Secondary students in the Northwest Territories and in Nunavut follow the Alberta curriculum and must meet the requirements of the Alberta Department of Education in order to graduate. Some modifications, such as the introduction of Northern Studies, have been made, but the majority of the curriculum taught

Although I understood teaching and I understood English as a subject, I soon discovered that I did not necessarily understand teaching English in this context. The skills that I used to interpret and make meaning of texts, skills taught and honed in academic situations, were not the same skills my students brought to the classroom. I had grown up in a world of books, and they had grown up in a world of oral storytellers. Although I understood figurative language, they were most likely to be literalists. While I lived vicariously through the experiences of characters, my students had difficulty connecting to the lives of people who lived in far away places. Through this experience, I learned the extent to which literature reflected Eurocentric values and those values, important in southern culture, were reinforced by the school curricula.

I also learned that the dominant culture is not necessarily the majority culture. Although the largest portion of the community and school population was Inuit, the culture of power in the community was southern. Businesses, offices, and schools followed the same hours as their southern counterparts and school vacations paralleled those in southern Canada. Southern education, southern financial systems, and southern architecture were becoming the norm, and the majority culture in the North was changing to fit this imposed culture. Historically, the Inuit had followed the rhythms of the seasons and the shifting daylight hours; currently school is in session during traditional hunting and fishing times, limiting the access of children to these traditional pursuits.

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were developed in Alberta. The reason for this is two fold: economically, the development of curricula is expensive and requires more resources than the territorial departments of education can afford, and second, the Alberta curriculum is recognized by universities, giving graduates access to post-secondary education.



I also learned that the current educational system disenfranchised more students than it embraced, evident in the low number of high school graduates and the high rates of absenteeism in the schools. In my first year as a teacher in the NWT, two young women from our community graduated from the high school in Yellowknife – they were the sixth and seventh high school graduates from this community. Some years there were no graduates, and each fall grade ten students left the community for high school in Yellowknife and slowly found their way home again. Some tried again the following year but most gave up on a high school education. Although community high schools increased the number of graduates, the majority of students still did not complete high school. My personal observations are supported by data from Statistics Canada (2005) which reports the 2002/03 high school graduation rates for the NWT and Nunavut to be 43.3 per cent and 25.6 per cent respectively.

As teachers, our goal was to make southern education and schooling relevant to our students, thereby increasing the number of high school graduates and giving them increased access to employment opportunities and post secondary education. As an English teacher, one of the ways I attempted to increase interest was through the selection of literature. Although some literature I chose “worked”, the question most frequently asked by my students was, “Where are our stories?” My experience led me to the same conclusion reached by Deborah McGregor (2005)<sup>3</sup>, “Aboriginal education must begin with our stories” (p. 72). Because of their persistence and my curiosity, I searched for

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<sup>3</sup> While APA formatting does not use authorial first names, I have chosen to follow MLA standards in this matter. The use of authorial first names is one way of recognizing the voices of women, voices that otherwise are in danger of being universalized as male.

those stories and discovered the world of Aboriginal literature. I was unable to find much literature written by Inuk authors, but I did discover many works authored by writers from other Aboriginal groups. Some of this literature resonated with my students in ways that the works selected from the school canon did not. Selections from *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature* (1992, 2005) and author Thomas King's (1995) *Medicine River* worked in the classroom. Poems such as Rita Joe's (1999) "Today's Learning Child" and "I Lost My Talk" led to interesting discussions about language loss and education. Sometimes reading these works in conjunction with the school canon provided new insights and understandings. In "My Breath," a traditional Inuit song, a weak and aged Orpingalik (2005) sings of his lost strength and increasing frailty. Students were able to draw parallels between Orpingalak and King Lear (1972), sparking discussion about the changing role of elders in contemporary Inuit society. And some canonical North American literature connected with the experiences of my students. Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1976) worked when read for their themes of alienation and exclusion. I found that students were more likely to make meaning of a text when we approached it from a socio-historical perspective rather than through formalist criticism.

The use of Aboriginal literature brought me new problems. Was it "good literature"? Could good literature be written in nonstandard English? What about those departmental exam questions that focused on figurative techniques and close readings? And how were we to read and make meaning of Aboriginal literature? Through this process, my critical lenses were tested and found myopic. I needed to find new ways to read literature, ways that valued the texts in hand in spite of their nonstandard English and unconventional plot

lines. This search for new ways of reading literature and empowering readers has brought me to this dissertation research. Through this research, I have attempted to find ways to rectify the historic imbalance that privileged the school canon and marginalized Aboriginal literature. I wanted Aboriginal students to have the opportunity to enrich their lives by becoming readers and hoped that access to Aboriginal stories would facilitate this process. My formulation of this latter goal rested on the awareness of Joan Kernan Cone's research that concluded that

The use of literature related to students' lives is also an important element in encouraging students to become readers. Teachers can make these connections by helping students see themselves in books, by choosing books that mirror their experience, and by helping them see the relevance of other people's stories to their own. (p. 225)

Through this research, I hoped to find ways that could be adapted to empower all students to see themselves in books and see the relevance and relationships between all stories.

## **The Study**

### **Background**

Up until the latter half of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of texts for Canadian secondary-school English programs were selected from canonized British and American works. By the end of the twentieth century, Canadian literature had also become part of the course of studies in secondary schools, and there was increasing concern about disenfranchising students from non-European backgrounds. In the past decade, curriculum writers and teachers have given attention to the role of world literature in the classroom as they attempted to provide students from diverse

backgrounds the opportunity to connect with texts that reflected their own cultural heritage (Johnston, 1996). Aboriginal Canadians are one group that has frequently not found voice in the literature studied in classrooms. As well as providing opportunity for students of marginalized and minority cultures to find voice, multicultural literature provides an opportunity for all students to learn about diverse cultures (Miller & McCaskill, 1993). In classrooms and communities across Canada, members of diverse cultures co-exist and cooperate alongside members of the dominant Euro-Canadian cultures.

The inclusion of multicultural and Aboriginal literature in the school curriculum has challenged traditional notions of canon, specifically the school canon. English literature became a formalized school subject during the nineteenth century and since its introduction, a body of literature, frequently taught and held in high esteem by educators has emerged. The works most frequently used in the school system are collectively known as the school canon. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the debate between those who adhere to the canon and those who call for its demise has intensified. John Guillory (1993) ties the school canon to cultural capital and illustrates how the selected works of literature have been used to maintain the status quo and the class structure:

The literary syllabus is the institutional form by means of which this knowledge [reading and writing] is disseminated, and it constitutes capital in two senses: First, it is *linguistic* capital, the means by which one attains to a socially credentialed and therefore valued speech, otherwise known as “Standard English.” And second, it is *symbolic* capital, a kind of knowledge-capital whose possession can be displayed upon request and which thereby entitles its possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person. (Guillory, 1993, p. ix)

Access to this cultural capital has frequently been denied to members of minority groups or attained at the cost of sacrificing their own cultural capital. This study sought to move toward at least a small change in the notions of cultural capital.

The 1999 Saskatchewan Secondary English Language Arts Curriculum (Appendix A) reflects this changing view of what literature should be taught in classrooms. The compulsory grade twelve course, English Language Arts 30A, focuses on Canadian literature and society, identifying Aboriginal voices as a possible sub-theme. Other jurisdictions have also recognized the need to change the course of studies to reflect the demographics of the classroom and choose literature accordingly. In the last twenty years, a marked increase in the number of published authors of varying Aboriginal ancestries has occurred, and the poetry, plays, and prose of these writers deserve to be studied. Although studying texts by Aboriginal authors provides a way of connecting Aboriginal students to the English Language Arts curriculum, such study also provides a way to expose other students to the works of Aboriginal authors, an important way of enhancing non-Aboriginal Canadians' knowledge of Aboriginal people. Teachers have long recognized that literature can enable readers to imaginatively enter the lives of others and develop an understanding of shared human experience. Cone (2000) emphasizes the many ways reading benefits high school students:

The habit of reading not only opens a world of vicarious adventure to students; it also encourages them to weigh ideas, take informed stands, and think deeply. Reading offers them insights into themselves and their worlds – private, national, global – insights that allow them to speak intelligently, vote wisely, rear kind children, counsel, lead. (p. 207)

Studying Aboriginal literature enables students and teachers to make one more connection as they gain the insights that will inform their decision-making.

The current and projected demographics in Saskatchewan lend urgency to these changes. Projected demographics predict the following changes to Saskatchewan's population:

- In 2001 Aboriginal children constituted 33% of the school-aged population, and
- By 2016, Aboriginal children will constitute 46.4% of the school-aged population.
- In 2001 75% of the population in northern areas was Aboriginal, and
- 90-98% of the student population in northern schools was Aboriginal.
- The number of individuals choosing to live off-reserve continues to increase steadily, shifting the demographics of urban schools. (Tymchak, 2001, pp. 8-9)

### **Research Goals and Objectives**

The study of literature in the senior secondary classroom is a complex process for all participants. Through the study of literature, teachers and students are involved in analysis, criticism, and the construction of meaning. To most successfully to construct meaning from texts by Aboriginal authors, teachers and students must approach the texts aware of the differing world views and cultural traditions of authors.

In many ways, the study of literature is inherently interdisciplinary. The accomplished English teacher combines information, knowledge, and skills from a variety of disciplines (literary criticism, educational pedagogy, history, and sociology, to name only a few) to understand, interpret, and construct meaning. In this study, I have recognized the

interdisciplinary nature of literary instruction. The overall goal of this research is to further develop the theory and pedagogy involved in the teaching of Aboriginal literature in the senior secondary classroom to advance the notion of a decolonized classroom.

I have three specific objectives for this research study:

1. to explore contemporary theories of literary criticism relevant to the study of Aboriginal literature, including an approach through colonial and post-colonial discourse and the growing body of theory and criticism written by North American Aboriginals;
2. to incorporate literary theory and pedagogical knowledge of content into the development of Aboriginal literature units; and
3. to incorporate the new interpretive and pedagogical understandings into the practices of two secondary English teachers using North American Aboriginal literature in their classrooms.

### **Building an Inukshuk**

I viewed the writing of this dissertation through the metaphor of building an inukshuk<sup>4</sup>. Inuksuit, those cairns of stones currently dotting the Canadian landscape and Canadian labels as diverse as beer and the Olympics, have been an important Inuit symbol for centuries. Norman Hallendy (2001) refers to them, in the subtitle of his book, as the “silent messengers of the Arctic”. According to Hallendy, the Inuit built Inuksuit to aid

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<sup>4</sup> Inukshuk is singular and inuksuit is the plural form. Spelling variations occur among the different dialect groups.

in hunting and navigation, to mark venerable places, or to pass the time; the Inuksuit were a method of “communicating by rearranging or shaping fragments of the landscape” (p. 66). The Inukshuk is an appropriate metaphor for this dissertation because it, like many Aboriginal Canadian symbols, is truly of this place. Some Inuksuit are ancient, attributed to the predecessors of the current Inuit, and others are more recent; each inukshuk, however, is part of the history of a specific place, a reminder of earlier narratives. Each inukshuk is built of local materials, reflecting a connection to the land and the relationship of individuals and collectives to this land. Decolonizing methodologies seek to connect and reconnect individuals to their geographic and historic place.

Like an Inukshuk, this dissertation marks my passage. Whether it serves as a directional marker or simply passed the time remains to be seen: however, I have tried to communicate by rearranging and shaping some of the fragments that make up this research project. Choosing the theoretical framework for this research has paralleled the selection of stones needed to build an inukshuk. In the building of an inukshuk, it is not always possible to know if the stone fits and will support the other stones until the builder sets it in place; in the same way, I have experimented with different theoretical frameworks in the search for the best fit. The nature of action research often moved away from the obvious connections to the theoretical frames. There are moments in this research project when I was able to step back and see the shape that was emerging; sometimes the connection between the shape and the theory was obvious and at other times, I needed to reconsider the theoretical framework and the unfolding research to determine the relationship between the stones. The creation of this document, like the



creation of an Inukshuk, involved the careful building of layers, ensuring that each section supports the subsequent sections.

In the first chapter, I prepare the ground, removing the debris and exposing the earth, my landscape and my history. I did not come to this research a blank slate; my life history and experiences are an integral part of this process. Just as preparing the ground exposes the earth beneath, embarking on this research journey exposed the ways in which my experiences had shaped my thinking.

Although an Inukshuk requires leveled ground on which to stand, it also requires firm foundations. The largest rocks are usually found at its base. The second and third chapters, through a review of the literature and an examination of the research methodology, establish the foundation for this research. I have chosen to deviate from the traditional five chapter format of a dissertation in Education to better reflect the many layers that emerged during the research. Chapters 4-11 tell the research story through the voices of the participants. These chapters determine the shape of the Inukshuk. Inuksuit are built of two types of rocks: those that determine the shape and those that shim and balance the major components. After the completion of the research and the initial examination of the data, I discovered that the initial literature review was not sufficient. The ninth chapter provides a supplementary literature review, focused on anti-racist education and teacher apprenticeships to provide support for the final chapters: the analysis of the data and the implications of this study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE FIRST FOUNDATIONAL STONE**

#### **Introduction**

Classrooms in English-speaking nations around the world offer English literature as a program of studies; in many instances, this program is not only offered, it is compulsory. Historically, the literature in these curricula is predominantly authored by white men of British or American citizenry and underpins an imperial view of the world. The students in these classrooms are not just of British, American, or European ancestry, but include Aboriginal peoples, immigrants and the children of immigrants from every part of the globe. Although current curricular documents recognize the limitations of the traditional canon, the taught literature rarely if ever reflects the gender and ethnic composition of the classroom. Since the world of the twenty-first century is an increasingly global and pluralistic society, teachers must examine the texts they choose to teach in the classroom. Who has selected the texts? How do they portray characters and unfold worlds from visible and invisible minorities? Who is empowered and who is marginalized by the texts? These are questions that teachers need to explore and examine as they select literature for their cosmopolitan classrooms.

However, teachers need to look beyond the texts they select for their classrooms and examine how those texts are taught. What critical strategies do they provide their students? Are they enabling students to read ‘against the grain’ or are teachers replicating existing social structures and readings through the critical methods they use? By examining the theories currently used to construct meanings from texts readers can begin to understand how interpretations of literature are used to shape society. By making students aware of the range of interpretive possibilities available teachers can help them deconstruct and reconstruct the society in which they will live. Residents of settler colonies must look at how literature curricula have colonized all members of the larger society. Len Findlay (2004) considers the dangers of essentialism:

Outsider essentializing of Indigenous history and cultural practices must be respectfully strategic rather than presumptuously exotic, and driven by the need to benefit Indigenous people according to their rights, needs, and aspirations. Non-Indigenous learning which crosses disciplines and cultures but remains unidirectional cannot avoid reinscribing diffusionist colonialism and the only too predictable classification of polymaths and primitives, masters and servants. (pp. 371-372)

In particular, educators must look at how these curricula continue to colonize and re-colonize students, and they must begin to examine ways to use the teaching of literature as a tool for the decolonization of Aboriginal and immigrant peoples.

This literature review is organized into six sections that support my research objectives. The first section explores the overarching issue of colonization and decolonization as it applies to schools and classrooms in the Canadian context and explores constructions of place in relation to identity construction. The next four sections deal with the first objective: to explore contemporary theories of literary criticism, including an approach

through colonial and postcolonial discourse and the growing body of theory and criticism written by North American Aboriginals. The preliminary section, “Mapping Colonialism: Colonization through Canon,” explores the historical roots of English as a school subject and the evolution of the school canon. “Diagnosing Colonialism: Recognizing the Results of Reading Through Western Eyes” questions the use of Eurocentric theories as interpretive tools in analyzing non-Eurocentric literatures. “Healing Colonialism: Learning to Read With Other Eyes” introduces postcolonial critical theory, and “Envisioning Decolonization: Learning to Read Through Aboriginal Eyes” introduces Aboriginal critical theory. The fifth section, “Pedagogical Challenges: Decolonizing the High School English Classroom” provides specific background for the second research objective: to incorporate literary theory and pedagogical content knowledge into the development of Aboriginal literature units.

### **Finding a Decolonized Canadian Sense of Place**

My experiences as a teacher and community member in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have led me to rethink my understandings of Canada and Canadian history. My previous experiences, I came to realize, had provided me with a very narrow understanding of Canada and a notion of history that began with the “discovery” of North America by Christopher Columbus. In 1992, 500 years after Columbus’s arrival in North America, Aboriginal groups in the north were negotiating land claims, seeking to have their residency prior to “discovery” acknowledged by federal and territorial governments. Their stories of place spanned centuries while mine only spanned a generation. My story of place began with grandparents who found refuge from war and revolution on farms in Saskatchewan. My sense of place was connected to that land, unclaimed and

uncultivated wilderness that had been made productive by the hard working hands of my grandfather and my father. Our family was blessed to have found a home in a country that was democratic, welcomed immigrants, tolerated our religious beliefs, and enabled us to feed and educate our children. Our story glossed over the intolerance of languages other than English because refugees needed to be grateful and honour the government and the king who had welcomed us to this empty land. Our story also accepted the notion that the land was empty, unclaimed, and unproductive, waiting for hard-working farmers to bring it to its productive potential. The history I was taught in school privileged this view of the land and Canada, glorifying the civilization that Europeans had brought to the lives of primitive hunters and gatherers. My introduction to the Canadian Aboriginal people occurred in grade three where we learned about tipis and iglus and longhouses, the exoticized other of pre-European contact. No reference was made to treaties or the current status of the Canadian Aboriginals. My personal experience with Aboriginals was limited to an itinerant farm worker who visited our farm annually and some classmates who were probably Métis and whose families were peripheral to the community. My story of place began with the Saskatchewan farm on which I was raised and my studies of the history of my people led me back to Europe and a view of Canada as a land of *unbegrenzte möglichkeiten* (unlimited opportunities), reinforcing the colonial view of Canada. The influence of the American civil rights movement exposed the racism and intolerance of Canadian society toward Aboriginal Canadians but did not cause me to question my Eurocentric conception of place. Not until I began to analyze my experience in the Arctic did I begin to understand that the privileging of Eurocentric narratives of place had silenced Aboriginal narratives and that silencing had led to the

marginalization of my students and their families and communities. Schools were complicit in this silencing, and I began to search for ways to work together with the community to privilege local narratives and give elders voice in the classroom.

A school in the Arctic looks very much like a school in southern Canada. The architecture, the furniture, the curriculum, and the organizational structures reflect western notions of schooling, although newer schools may have an area designed for storytelling and drum dancing. All schools introduce a range of cultural inclusion activities, but the relationships between the school and the communities are often ambivalent. Schooling has been imposed on the community rather than growing out of the community – the sense of place is missing. Marie Battiste and Cathryn McConaghy (2005) claim that

Every conception of humanity arises from a specific place and from the people of that place. How such places shape and sustain the people of a place is the focus of education that enables each student to understand themselves and makes them feel at home in the world. (p. 1)

The schools in the Arctic have historically ignored the ways in which place sustained and shaped the people of that place while attempting to impose a conception of humanity that arose in a different place.

The conceptions of humanity that arose in the European context were also imposed on immigrant Canadians, but over time the connection to the old places has been lost and the new place begins to shape identity. Victoria Freeman (2000) notes that

I have come to realize how much immigrants lose of their family memory because it is tied to physical places – to houses, farms, towns, landmarks, battlefields, and graves. (p. xvii)

As settler colonists, non-Aboriginal Canadians re-conceptualize their sense of place as they attempt to become the people of that place. Freeman contrasts the “amnesia of each generation” (p. xvii) of immigrants with the Aboriginal people whose “memory has been absolutely essential to survival” (p. xviii). The stories that have been told and those that have been suppressed become the new narratives of place, shaping new memories that reflect specific historical perspectives. Freeman contends that

In the case of the colonization of North America, two kinds of memory, or rather non-memory – that of the family and that of the state – reinforce one another in suppressing our knowledge of our history with aboriginal people. (p. xvii)

These colonizing narratives have become the dominant historical narrative of Canadians and other stories, stories of the original inhabitants as well as stories of immigrants, have remained untold. Freeman, like Battiste and McConaghy recognizes the power and the importance of place in creating a sense of belonging. Within settler colonies historic notions of place were disrupted when ancestral homes were left behind and new homes were established. Concurrently, the Aboriginal people’s narratives of place were also disrupted as new governing bodies with different conceptions of land use and ownership arrived and encouraged settler colonists. Educators, working within this context, need to consider their narratives of place and determine whether or not these narratives enable students to feel at home in the world and whether those narratives continue the colonization story or contribute to decolonization.

Individual narratives of place have their roots in family, but notions of place have changed radically as our global society has become more mobile. Where at one time, generations remained in the same community and perhaps on the same plot of land, it is now common for individuals to have lived in multiple locations in vastly different geographical and political environments. Immediate family members may find themselves on different continents, no longer sharing the same historical narratives. Alongside family and community narratives, school narratives have gained importance and credence in establishing notions of place.

Although Battiste and McConaghy advocate a conception of place that “enables each student to understand themselves and makes them feel at home in the world” (p. 1), the colonial classroom has not always done that. Contemporary notions of school differ enormously from Indigenous educational models. Indigenous education in all cultures took place in a natural way and was part of the environmental place. In comparison, school is an artificial construct, removing students from the natural environment and placing them in an environment constructed by society. In the case of settler colonies such as Canada, schools have been conceptualized by the colonizing agencies and reflect Eurocentric practices and world views. Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986) reflects on the role schools played in African colonies:

African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experiencing the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. Their entire way of looking at the world, even the world of the immediate environment, was Eurocentric. Europe was the centre of the universe. The earth moved around the European intellectual scholarly axis. The images children encountered in literature were reinforced by their study of geography and history, and



science and technology where Europe was, once again, the centre. This in turn fit well with the cultural imperatives of British imperialism. (p. 93)

In this respect, colonial education in Canada did not differ extensively from the African experience, and schools continue to reflect the colonizing narratives. Recent curricular revisions have begun to address the colonizing ideologies present in the school, ideologies that activists such as Paulo Freire (1974, 1985, 1989) have attempted to counter.

Freire, through his work in adult literacy in Brazil, began to examine the role of education in oppression and liberation, advocating for educational reforms that would counter his banking model of education and develop the dialogue between teacher and student. Freire was concerned with the ways in which education supported the goals of the government and landowners while continuing to oppress the peasants. The banking model of education saw students as empty vessels that teachers filled with the appropriate knowledge, which those in power determined without consideration of place and the needs of the learners, leading to education as a practice of domination:

Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man [woman] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from men. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract men nor the world without men, but men in their relations with the world. (Freire, 1989, p. 69)<sup>5</sup>

Freire contended that colonial education in Brazil was a form of cultural invasion, imposing the colonizers' world view while silencing the colonized:

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<sup>5</sup> Freire's use of the word 'man' as universal reflects the patriarchal world view and is ironic because his critique of education as domination does not concern itself with the patriarchal domination of women.

In this context, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression. (Freire, 1989, p. 150)

Freire suggests that this cultural invasion can be reversed if the teacher “asks himself *what* he will dialogue with the latter [student] *about*” (Freire, 1989, p. 82, italics in original) and begins to consider education as liberating by inviting “learners to recognize and unveil reality critically” (Freire, 1985, p. 102). The dialogical relationship between teacher and student encourages a democratic and liberating education that alters the relationship between the invaders and the oppressed, the colonizers and the colonized, in an effort to work toward a more equitable society.

For Freire's conception of dialogical education to succeed, all parties must be interested in and committed to entering into dialogue. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) explains why this goal is not easily achieved:

By a series of selection operations, the system separates the holders of inherited capital from those who lack it. Differences of aptitude being inseparable from social differences according to inherited capital, the system thus tends to maintain preexisting social differences. (p. 20)

Bourdieu, who examines two forms of inherited capital, economic and cultural, that are used to maintain the existing system, contends that the distribution of cultural capital is closely tied to school institutions. Educational institutions achieve their perceived strength and power through the validation of a specific knowledge, normalizing and universalizing that knowledge in the process by legitimizing a dominant language and

culture. Any attempt to modify the school programs that inculcate the societal norms is met by resistance:

It is not only because powerful occupational interests (such as those of the teaching staff) are attached to the established academic order. It is also because matters of culture, in particular the social divisions and hierarchies associated with them, are constituted as such by the actions of the state, which, by instituting them both in things and in minds, confers upon the cultural arbitrary all the appearances of the natural. (p. 38)

Bourdieu further contends that the educational structures are designed to maintain the existing power structures and the view of history, language and culture presented in schools is central to the maintenance of the status quo. The effectiveness of these structures is evident in the resistance to change demonstrated by societal institutions and members. Governments that wish to bring about change often do so through a revision of curricula; however, parents and teachers are often resistant to the changes, seeing them as an erosion of the universal. This resistant stance perpetuates the colonizing ideology of Canadian schools and hinders efforts to decolonize the educational system.

Henry Giroux (1992) calls for the development of a critical pedagogy “through which educators and students can think critically about how knowledge is produced and transformed in relation to the construction of social experiences informed by a particular relationship between the self, others, and the larger world” (pp. 98-99). Giroux recognizes Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital and hopes to counter culture as “an object of unquestioning reverence” by calling for a new notion of culture as a “set of lived experiences and social practices developed within asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 99). The pedagogical approach that enables teachers and students to critique and

challenge the notions of cultural capital is political and begins with liberation and empowerment. Giroux's notion of critical pedagogy calls for a critique of canon to acknowledge the colonizing of differences through the representations of the Other. Giroux contends that canonical literatures typically represent the Other from a deficit perspective, "in which the humanity of the Other is posited either as cynically problematic or ruthlessly denied" (p. 103). For decolonization to occur, Giroux's pedagogy of difference unravels "the ways in which the voices of the Other are colonized and repressed by the principal of identity that runs through the discourse of dominant groups" and enables the Others to reclaim "their own histories, voices and visions" (pp. 103-104).

Postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said have also been concerned with how Eurocentric world views have colonized and marginalized the Other. Spivak (1993) critiques the role of education in the colonizing process and considers ways in which education can contribute to the decolonization process. Spivak is concerned that as power shifts from the centre to the margin, the margins simply replicate the colonial systems, creating a neocolonial educational system. She asks, "Does not participation in such a privileged and authoritative apparatus [government funded teacher training institutions] require the greatest vigilance?" (p. 58). Institutions shaped by Eurocentric colonial governments are often replicated by the governmental structures of the newly independent states since few other structures exist as models. Through this replication, those Indigenous individuals who were empowered in the colonial structures become the new centre, replacing the expatriate colonists but leaving the margins relatively untouched. Spivak calls for vigilance to ensure that neocolonialism does not prevent

decolonization. She recognizes the difficulty inherent in conceptualizing postcolonial space without an adequate historical referent but stresses the importance of advancing the decolonizing agenda and identifies the central issues:

The political claims that are most urgent in decolonized space are tacitly recognized as coded within the legacy of imperialism: nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, even culturalism. Within the historical frame of exploration, colonization, decolonization – what is being effectively reclaimed is a series of regulative political concepts, the *supposedly* authoritative narrative of production of which was written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe. (p. 60)

Indigenous Canadians involved in the decolonization process deal with these specific political concepts. My observations of the Nunavut governmental structures lead me to conclude that decolonizing is a complex and difficult process. Although the visionaries who negotiated the land claims settlement dreamed of a self-government that reflected the historical sense of place, enacting those dreams has been problematic. Societal changes, the result of colonialism, have complicated traditional governing models. Colonial institutions such as schools are seen to be a necessary part of contemporary society. Rethinking educational structures based on Indigenous models and designed to fit current needs is difficult. One obvious problem is that the colonial infrastructure exists: radical changes do not fit within that infrastructure and the monetary costs of changing the infrastructure are high. Casting off the “narrative of production” is a slow and tedious process.

Part of this process is dealing with the sense of loss that accompanies the societal changes brought about by colonialism. This sense of loss affects both the displaced Indigene and the settler colonists. Indigenous Canadians occupy a place of exile because colonialism

created a rift between their geographic and spiritual senses of place; settler colonists occupy a place of exile because of their spatial separation from place. Said (1990) describes exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted....The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever” (p. 357). Contemporary Canadians need to reshape their identities by creating or renewing connections to this geographic place. Indigenous Canadians have begun this renewal process by reclaiming place names that were ignored by the colonizing explorers. The changing map of the Arctic exemplifies this process: Frobisher Bay is again Iqaluit, Coppermine is again Kugluktuk, and Holman has recently returned to Uluhaktok. Returning to the original place names is one step in diminishing the spiritual exile of Aboriginal Canadians; it also important for immigrant Canadians to supplant the notion of an empty land needing to be remade in Europe’s image by recognizing the original inhabitants of this land. This re-renaming of the land will lead to changes in the national narrative that may in turn lead to reshapings of the Canadian identity. Said (1990) states that

Triumphant, achieved nationalism then justifies, retrospectively as well as prospectively, a history selectively strung together in a narrative form; thus all nationalisms have their founding fathers, their basic, quasi-religious texts, their rhetoric of belonging, their historical and geographical landmarks, their official enemies and heroes. The collective ethos forms what Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, calls the *habitas*, the coherent amalgam of practices linking habit with inhabitation. In time, successful nationalisms consign the truth exclusively to themselves and relegate falsehood and inferiority to outsiders. (p. 259)

The current national narrative justifies a colonial history and, in the process, silences the narratives of the Other which includes Aboriginals, refugees, and immigrants from

countries other than the two founding nations. The version of truth created by this narrative perpetuates colonialism, and to create a decolonizing narrative “we must simultaneously negotiate the crude classifications which are imposed upon us and create our own identities out of the twisted skeins of our backgrounds, families and environments” (Ferguson, 1990, p. 13).

Homi Bhabha (1994) defines the unraveling of these twisted skeins as interstitial moments and notes that

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (p. 2)

These negotiations, according to Bhabha, necessarily recall the past, not to entrench the historical narrative, but to interrupt the present, creating an in-between space that facilitates the creation of a new narrative:

Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an ‘in-between’ temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history. This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge...And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive ‘image’ at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging home and the world. (p. 13)

To build a bridge between home and the world, one must have a sense of home. To have a sense of home, one must have a place to call home. Ultimately, that sense of place and the inherent feelings of belonging may be more important than the relationship to the

centre. Marginality, in the words of bell hooks (1990), “is much more than a site of deprivation....it is also a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance....It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (p. 341). Within this space of marginality, however, is a sense of belonging. Ferguson (1990) suggests that a difference exists between marginality and marginalization; “margin and center can draw their meanings only from each other. Neither can exist alone” (p. 13). hooks identifies one way in which marginality contributes to the new narrative. By refusing to remain silent, by refusing to be silenced, and by refusing to remain wounded and in a space of deprivation, the margin can launch an intervention sending “a message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer” (p. 343). Erasure of these categories and recognition of marginality rather than acting to marginalize shifts the power differential and enables margin and centre to forge a relationship with place.

One way that resistance can forge a relationship with place is through the Indigenous humanities:

The Indigenous humanities operate locally and distinctively but confirm universals that characterize all human beings, including that which sustains our ability to communicate through language and art, to mark our place and progress across time and space, and to locate ourselves reflectively and spiritually in relation to each other, to the world we all share, and to the forces that lie beyond our understanding or control. The indigenous humanities function as both critique and creativity, resistance and celebration. (Battiste & McConaghy, 2005, p. 5)



The Indigenous humanities, as a site of critique and creativity, resistance and celebration, mirror hooks' notion of the margin as a site of creativity and power, resistance and healing. The Indigenous humanities, however, claim that "every conception of humanity and education begins from a human body in territory and a consciousness in which a specific place takes prominence" (Battiste, Bell, Findlay, Findlay, & Henderson, p. 8). The colonial narratives have imposed a consciousness conceived in a foreign place onto the educational and governmental structures of Canada. The result of this imposition has been the exclusion of Indigenous narratives from the national narratives and the exclusion of the Indigene from educational institutions. The Indigenous humanities seek to call these exclusionary practices into question, seeking to develop educational institutions that connect the humanities with the ecology of place:

Like ecologies, heritages or cultures should play a key role in education. They honour and nourish a respect for diversity rather than fetishising narrow preferences and needless authoritarian hierarchy. Indigenous concepts of humanity relate to a certain style of being human, of doing important tasks, and overcoming the forces of doubt and inertia. (Battiste, et. al., p. 12)

Acceptance of the Indigenous humanities contributes to the decolonization of the educational system. Battiste, et. al., suggest that educators who recognize the ways in which "Eurocentric ideologies... have shaped the educational curricula and therefore their students" will also "recognise very different and legitimate ways of knowing and doing" (p. 13). These ways of knowing and doing will reflect and honour the specific place that nurtures consciousness. One way of introducing these ways of knowing and doing is through the selection of literature taught in the schools.

## Mapping Colonialism: Colonization Through Canon

For much of the twentieth century, literature selected for the classroom was chosen from a list of works collectively known as the canon. According to Robert C. Davis and Ronald Schleifer (1998), “the canon is a historical snapshot of what is valued. What constitutes canon depends on who is taking the snapshot and to what end” (p. 8). Our current snapshot, often referred to as the great works of literature, forms the core of accepted works in our educational system. Canon, in reference to an accepted list of literary works, is a twentieth-century term, rooted in the work of F. R. Leavis (1969, 1975) and further developed in the works of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1987), Allan Bloom (1987), and Harold Bloom (1994). However, the concept of a literary canon as a colonizing agent finds its roots in the schools of the empire:

Recent studies of imperial textuality are ... mindful of an alleged complicity between nineteenth-century colonial ideology and the emergence of English literature as an academic discipline in the colonies... [C]ritics frequently cite Macaulay’s infamous minute of 1835, which defended the introduction of ‘English Education’ in colonial India on the grounds that ‘a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia’. Macaulay’s valorisation of English literature at the cost of Indigenous literatures is taken as a paradigmatic instance of canon formation. Arguably, his hierarchy of literary value establishes English literature as the normative embodiment of beauty, truth and morality, or, in other words, as a textual standard that enforces the marginality and inferiority of colonized cultures and their books. (Gandhi, 1998, p. 144)

If the written texts of India and Arabia were deemed next to worthless in the eyes of the colonizers, of how much less worth was the orature of the Americas, Africa, and Oceania? Education, specifically the study of English, became “the most substantial weapon in the colonial arsenal” (p. 145).

Hirsch (1987), concerned with what he saw as the declining educational standards of Americans, entrenched the notion of canon in the concept of cultural literacy. Hirsch reasoned that

To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world.... Cultural literacy constitutes the only sure avenue of opportunity for disadvantaged children, the only reliable way of combating the social determinism that now condemns them to remain in the same social position and educational condition as their parents. (Hirsch 1987, p. xiii)

Hirsch sees his list of “5000 things every American needs to know” as being the great leveler between classes. However, a close reading of Hirsch’s list illustrates the American-European centredness of the selections and demonstrates the internal colonization at work in the American education system. The levelling of classes refers not only to economic classes but, more specifically, to the divisions between ethnicized and racialized groups. Through Hirsch’s curriculum of cultural literacy, assimilation is carried one step further as the dominant world view is further reinforced in the classroom.

Hirsch’s work was followed by Harold Bloom’s (1994) *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* in which Bloom lists the works of literature that he believes students should be taught and the literate person should have read. Both Hirsch and Bloom have, at the centre of their work, the desire to promote American nationalism and their definition of the American democratic system. Bloom, like Hirsch, does not see the inherent limitations in his construction of canon. According to Bloom, the elitism of his Western canon is justified and necessary:

The Western Canon, despite the limitless idealism of those who would open it up, exists precisely in order to impose limits, to set a standard of measurement that is anything but political or moral....Cognition cannot

proceed without memory, and the Canon is the true art of memory, the authentic foundation for cultural thinking....By its very nature, the Western Canon will never close, but it cannot be forced open by our current cheerleaders. Strength alone can open it up, the strength of a Freud or a Kafka, persistent in their cognitive negations. (p. 35)

Although Bloom claims that his Canon will never close, it indeed cannot be forced open by the current cheerleaders of non-canonical literature, including women, writers of colour, and Indigenous writers, writing in English or in their reshaping of the language. Bloom's Canon is closed because "all canons... are elitist" (p. 37), and Bloom has chosen those works that he believes deserve rereading. Bloom goes so far as to claim that "without the Canon, we cease to think"(p. 41). Perhaps it is the canon itself, closed and colonizing, which prevents us from thinking.

Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (1997) claim that the purpose of canon and education is, within the context of Hirsch's and Bloom's work, to nationalize and create an American identity. Cope and Kalantzis identify one purpose of this view of education to be assimilation:

In its content, the curriculum of modern nationalism attempted to assimilate those it found inconveniently different, incompatible with the projects of industry and nation state....In its form, in other words, the modern nationalist curriculum was more than a metaphor for social order. It was a tool for cultural construction....It [canon] performs a very modern cultural function. It specifies a singular national culture as the objective of schooling and it uses a pedagogy of received Truth to impose its cultural order and maintain its boundaries. (pp. 301-302)

Ingrid Johnston (1996) comments further on the political nature of canon construction:

Canonicity is not so much about texts as about status and evaluation, the criteria and standards according to which not only individual works and authors, but also entire movements and discourses themselves fall in or out of favour. It is a process in which texts, styles and approaches are

designated literary and perceived as worthy of attention, or are pushed to the margins and allowed to disappear. (p. 61)

Considering this political nature of the canon and the attempt to “assimilate those that are different,” to “combat social determinism,” (Hirsch 1987, p. xiii) or to “impose cultural order” (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997, p. 302), the question of who is being colonized and who is being pushed to the margins begs to be asked.

Critics of Hirsch and Bloom, such as Cope and Kalantzis, see the works of the nationalists as attacks on the multicultural movement in the United States. The establishment may view the social changes with concern because

If white men and the old intellectual establishment are disoriented – if they feel they are being told new and uncongenial truths – they are right. The world is changing. (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997, p. 294)

Although Hirsch’s and Bloom’s vision of the Western Canon and the cultural literacy has an Amer-European world view at its centre, Edward Said (1993) does not believe there is a singular American world view:

Before we can agree on what the American identity is made of, we have to concede that as an immigrant settler society superimposed on the ruins of considerable native presence, American identity is too varied to be a unitary and homogenous thing. (p. xxv)

Within this struggle to create a unified view of nationalism, curriculum writers have canonized the ‘great works’ of literature and the education system, specifically the teaching of English, has been used to create a homogenous and undifferentiated society. Frequently unanswered is the question of how works become great: is Bloom’s declaration that they must be worth rereading enough? Within the hallowed halls of academe, the battle rages between those, like Bloom, who hold fast to the traditional view

of canon and those who wish to open the canon or declare it null and void in an attempt to privilege the literature written and read by individuals outside the current canon. Elizabeth Minnich (1990) feels that this construction of the literary canon and the literary classroom needs to be examined:

In a Literature course, the development of the study of literature as a profession is never discussed.... Students are left with the impression—or are directly told—that significant works of literature “emerge over time” and are “recognized,” as if greatness is an essential quality (like the wetness of water) that is simply there to be experienced. (p. 41)

In considering how the great works emerge over time, we cannot exclude the human labour that enabled these works to survive. Great works are marked not only for the universality of their themes but also for the economic systems that perpetuate their production. In the late twentieth century, the power of the publishing companies in the privileging of voice has intensified. The textbook industry is worth billions of dollars to its shareholders, who would prefer to have it remain uncritiqued. The unexamined curriculum still works as a colonizing force and privileges the voices that already hold power. Minnich contends that only through the examination of curricula can change be brought about. That change has occurred is evident in the evolution of the school canons over the ages and the ways in which the school canons reflect national identities. The British canon provided the skeleton of both the American and Canadian school canons. Over time, texts written by American authors became part of the American and Canadian school canons and, more recently, Canadian texts have been added to the Canadian canon. Revisions to the school canons have been gradual and are reflective of geographic and political contexts; these revisions are often met with resistance by those who feel that the evolving counter-canons will erode the quality of education.

Both Spivak (1993) and Giroux (1992) identify the ways in which the academic canon is part of the colonizing political agenda. Giroux identifies canon formation as a form of cultural and political production and calls for a challenge to the social uses that canon has served in order to change the power relationships:

The issue of canon formation must be engaged in terms that address the historical formation of the canon and the pedagogies through which it is taught and how these pedagogies have either provided or excluded the conditions and knowledge necessary for marginal people to recover their own histories and to speak and learn in places occupied by those who have the dominant power to shape policy and act. (p. 96)

Spivak reiterates Giroux's notions of a political canon and identifies the ways in which canon is connected to institutions. Spivak calls for an expansion of the academic canon that would change the way English is taught in the postsecondary institutions:

Canons are the condition of institutions and the effect of institutions. Canons secure institutions as institutions secure canons....It is within this constraint that some of us in the profession are trying to expand the canon.

Since it is indubitably the case that there can be no expansion without contraction, we *must* remove the single author courses from the English major curriculum. We must make room for the coordinated teaching of the new entries into the canon....The undergraduates will have their lives changed perhaps by a sense of the diversity of the new canon and the unacknowledged power-play involved in securing the old.

Spivak and Giroux both acknowledge the political power of canon and recognize that exclusion from the school canon has been complicit in the silencing of minority groups.

Within the context of settler colonies such as Canada, those people who have been largely excluded from knowledge and knowledge-making are the non-Anglo-Saxon immigrant and Aboriginal peoples. Although literature written by North American Aboriginal authors is abundant, its place in the classroom is negligible. Bloom's Western

Canon has no room for these writers from the margins and the giant publishing houses, until very recently, have not opened their doors to these authors. Were it not for a handful of small, independent publishing companies willing to take a chance on unknown writers, most of these authors would remain unpublished. This inaccessibility to market is a further instance of colonization described by Helen Hoy (2001):

Native writing, editing, publishing, performing, reviewing, teaching, and reading necessarily take place, at least partially, in contexts shaped and controlled by the discursive and institutional power of dominant white culture in Canada. (p. 13)

For singular notions of canon to be dissolved, the colonizing agent it has become needs to be understood. However, the works of literature themselves are not the only agents of colonization at work in the literature classroom. How students are taught to read and interpret these texts has also been a major contributor to the colonizing agency of the literature classroom.

### **Diagnosing Colonialism: Recognizing the Results of Reading Through Western Eyes**

Although the literary canon has been used to colonize the outposts of empire by providing an education that iterated notions of the colonial centre as the ideal, ways of reading these texts prevented the margins from being heard. As Guari Viswanathan (1989) notes, the English Education Act of 1835 confirmed English as the language of instruction in colonial India. English as a subject gained importance as it “took on more moralistic, humanistic functions” (p. 85). Viswanathan indicates that the “study of literature as an expression of the culture of an age and the reflection of a society” (p. 118) led to a historical approach to literature which served two purposes:



The object of literary training is understood as twofold: first, to develop a historical awareness of the cultural moments in which those usages, precedents, and conventions are especially strong and second, to reclaim those moments as exemplary instances of truth, coherence, and value. (p. 119)

This approach to the teaching of English had a “religious and moral function in the Indian curriculum” (p. 119) a function that tied into a colonial agenda.

As English became entrenched as an academic subject, theories developed to guide readers’ interpretations of text; the study of literature became synonymous with the search for meaning. These theories of literary criticism were developed by academics living and writing within the European centres of Britain and France, influenced by European philosophers. The generation of criticism spilled over into the academic institutions of the United States where it was still highly influenced by the writings from the European centre: “the production of *criticism* has become the central activity of the culture industries of the imperial centers, especially those in institutions of higher education” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 476). Although literary criticism provided keys to reading texts, and many recent forms of criticism such as those oriented by Marxism and feminism, considered those who were traditionally voiceless, literature from the margins still had little place within the classrooms of high schools and universities. In the mid-twentieth century, historicism gave way to formalism and has been used almost exclusively in the teaching of high school English until the introduction of reader-response theory in the 1980s, denying students the opportunity to read with other than western eyes. The critical theories used reinforced western ideologies, continuing the process of colonization.

Of the diverse critical theories available to the student of literature, New Criticism or formalism has dominated the secondary school English classroom. New Criticism reinforced the power of the canon as “New Critics postulated the text as a sacrosanct object, hermetically sealed from the contaminations of both rational enquiry and the materialistic world which occasioned such enquiry” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 160). One result of this limited methodological approach to textual analysis has been, in the words of Arun Mukherjee (1995), the creation of a putative ‘universal.’ Students focusing on the universality of human experience erase “the ambiguities and the unpleasant truths that lie in the crevices” and forget that “society is not a homogenous grouping but an assortment of groups” (p. 450). In this sense, literary criticism acts as Hirsch’s great leveler between classes:

Instead of facing up to the realities of ‘power, class, culture, social order and disorder,’ literary critics and editors of literary anthologies hide behind the universalist vocabulary that only mystifies the true nature of reality.... [T]he editor-critic feeds students on a vocabulary that pretends that human beings and their institutions have not changed a bit during the course of history, that they all face the same problems as human beings...(Mukherjee, 1995, p. 451)

By focusing on form, teachers of literature have limited the power of the text and downplayed the role of the author. Mukherjee (1995) leaves us with these questions:

What about the questions regarding the ideology and social class of the writer, the role and ideology of the patrons and the disseminators of literature, the role of literature as a social institution and finally, the role of the teacher-critic of literature as a transmitter of the dominant social and cultural values? Have these questions no place in our professional deliberations? (p. 451)

The rule of formalism was challenged in academic centres in the latter half of the twentieth century as new critical theories evolved and provided new methods of reading texts. Through these methods, diverse ways of coming to know were acknowledged, and

the role of the reader in the construction of meaning was privileged. Theoretical approaches such as Marxism and feminism examined texts from the viewpoint of the marginalized Other. However, much of the critical theory was still rooted in the imperial centres. As Mitchell (1995) indicates, contemporary critical theory may have attempted to privilege the margins, but its production in the centre impeded its success:

Perhaps this is why so many imaginative writers of the Third World look with wary fascination on contemporary criticism—unsure whether it is a friendly collaborator in the process of decolonisation, or a threatening competitor for limited resources. (pp. 476-477)

As long as literary criticism is generated in the imperial centres, it remains suspect in its attempt to privilege marginalized texts. For critical theory to provide a methodology that invites outsiders to challenge the notions of universalism and to privilege the voices of the marginalized Other, that theory must come from those voices of the Third and Fourth Worlds. Postcolonialism is a critical theory that has in part come from some of those voices.

### **Healing Colonialism: Learning To Read With Other Eyes**

Since the 1980s, postcolonialism has emerged, along with women's studies, cultural studies, and gay/lesbian studies, as one of the 'new humanities'. These have, according to Leela Gandhi,

endeavoured first, to foreground the exclusions and elisions which confirm the privileges and authority of canonical knowledge systems, and second to recover those marginalized knowledges which have been occluded and silenced by the entrenched humanist curriculum. (p. 42)

Gandhi goes on to note that, like feminism, postcolonialism has

consistently demanded equal access to the *means* of knowledge and also equal participation in the *making* of knowledge on the grounds that inherited knowledges are hopelessly constrained by the preoccupations of the... institutions within which they have been developed and validated. (p. 43)

She further notes that postcolonialism “directs its critique against the cultural hegemony of European knowledges in an attempt to reassert the epistemological value and agency of the non-European world” (p. 44). Beginning with writers such as Edward Said (1979, 1983, 1993), Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994), and Gayatri Spivak (1990, 1993, 1996, 1999), postcolonialists challenge readers to look for the underlying assumptions of European imperialism in literature. Said builds on Bhabha’s tenet that “nations are narrations” (p. xiii) and the stories told and not told are central to the formation of culture and nation. In this sense, narratives function as tools of both the colonizers and the colonized:

The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection. (p. xiii)

Said encourages his readers to discard the binaries that have resulted from imperialism and challenge the static notions of identity that pervade current views of the world. The experience of empire needs to be described in the ways it pertains to all participants, “Indians *and* Britishers, Algerians *and* French, Westerners *and* Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and Australians” (p. xxii).

Ngugi Wa Thiongo (2000) suggests that literary criticism cease looking for differences and begin examining connections. He feels that the emphasis on binaries has increased the power of the colonizers:

What has been wrong in the colonial context is that the act of interpreting the other culture that is far from us has, instead of clarifying real connections and each culture, thereby illuminating the other, ended by making us captives of the foreign culture and alienating us from our own. (p. 119)

Ngugi continues by suggesting that borders, although marking the end of one region, also mark the beginning of the next; they are “thus at once a boundary and a shared space” (p. 120). In his experience in the African context, this shared space has been ignored and the colonial centre has maintained power through control of the educational institutions and the language: “the acquisition of that intellectual tool becomes a process of alienating ourselves from our own languages and what they can in fact produce” (p. 122). Ngugi invites readers to use literary criticism as a tool for building bridges rather than reinforcing borders.

Postcolonial criticism invites us to consider those texts authored outside the imperial centres, works written, usually in English, by the Indigenous and settler citizens of former colonies. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1990) define these as minor literatures, literatures written by a minority in a major language. They describe these literatures as having three major characteristics: “the language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization”; “everything in them is political”; and “everything takes on a collective value” (pp. 59-60). These narratives evolved over time. Initially the narratives were written for the colonizers as the colonized sought inclusion in the dominant society and only when they continued to be marginalized did the narratives become those of separation. These later narratives of resistance detailed the experiences of the colonized at the hands of the colonizers. However, in far too many instances, the emerging groups and their narrations were rejected by the dominant groups and the

literature of resistance shifted from a quest for inclusion to a quest for a distinct cultural and autonomous political identity.

In her study of resistance literature, Barbara Harlow (1987), writing about the literature that grows out of armed resistance, states that “the language skills of rhetoric together with armed struggle are essential to an oppressed people’s resistance to domination and oppression and to an organized liberation movement” (p. xv). As a result, the literature produced by colonized peoples “presents a serious challenge to the codes and canons of both the theory and practice of literature and its criticism as these have been developed in the west” (p. xvi). Harlow (1987) contends that the language of literary production is also a political choice, and although education may have made the colonizer’s language the language of literature, the subversion of that language is a form of resistance practised by the colonized. Considering resistance literature without considering the political stance of the writers is not possible and, as a result, relevant literary theory must be grounded in the political.

In the case of settler colonies such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, this resistance functions on two levels. Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson (2001) define settler colonies as “permanent colonial settlements [that] have relied on the presence of long-term, majority white racial communities, where Indigenous peoples have been outnumbered and removed by colonial policies and practices” (p. 361). Inherent in this type of colonization is an isolation and separation, both physically and intellectually, from the colonizing nation. In the case of Canada, this is further complicated by the notion of two founding nations and two centuries of immigration from every part of the world. As a

result, the layers of colonialism are several, and although the settler colonist is “both colonized and colonizing” (p. 363), in the Canadian context, these layers become particularly apparent. Although immigrants from Great Britain could directly relate to the colonizing nation, those from other parts of Europe were privileged by skin colour but disadvantaged through language and cultural and political understandings. To become Canadian, they were colonized by both ideological and repressive state apparatuses; schools were a prime example of a colonizing apparatus. This process of colonization was even more marked in immigrants of colour who were unable to blend into the cultural majority but remained distinct cultural groups within the larger population. However, all immigrants or settlers were either directly or indirectly responsible for the relocation and colonization of the Aboriginal population. Because many settlers have severed ties with their home countries, they had difficulty determining who they were or where they were from. Having embraced a doctrine of multiculturalism, Canadians give themselves labels such as German-Canadians, Japanese-Canadians, Jamaican-Canadians. Yet the cultural ties to other countries decrease with each generation and the sense of belonging to the ‘new’ country increases with each generation. Johnston and Lawson (2001) claim that the settlers feel an increasing need to become Indigenous and as a result, the ‘nation narrative’ is written in ways that result in a text that is “marked by counterfeittings of both emergence and origination” (p. 369). They argue that this space of emergence and origination leaves the settler caught between the First World of Europe, marked by concepts of culture and civilization, and the First Nations of Canada, marked by a fascination with the wilderness and survival.

Postcolonial literary theory, like the critical theories that have preceded it, finds its home in the academic institutions of the First and Second worlds. As in so many other areas, the recognition of the margins has served to strengthen the centre and reinforce the binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that were created through colonization. Postcolonialism, to a certain degree, has privileged the voice of the marginalized ‘Other.’ However, that privileging of voice has not dissolved the binaries that separate the First and Third Worlds. Rather, according to Stephen Slemon (1996), it has created a Second World of settler colonies that is now marginalized for not being marginal enough. Settler-invaders, like Third World authors, struggle to have their hegemonic critics, the academy, and the public legitimize their voice. Slemon (1996) argues that

the illusion of a stable self/other, here/there binary division has *never* been available to Second-World writers, and that as a result the sites of figural contestation between oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized, have been taken *inward* and *internalised* in Second-World post-colonial practice. (p. 80, italics in the original)

Although the binary of First and Third Worlds excludes the Second World, the Second World’s struggle for legitimacy and independence from the empire has led to the marginalization of a fourth group, the Aboriginal peoples of the settler colonies, the Fourth World. Although the critical theories of the First World and postcolonialism can be used to interpret literatures of the First, Second, and Third Worlds, they are not adequate in understanding the literature and orature of the Fourth World because “Indigenous literature [and by extension, orature] cannot be understood completely from a Western perspective” (Fee, 1997, p. 24).



Too frequently, the literatures of Aboriginal peoples have been excluded from the curricula of high schools and universities. The literature of settler-colonists entered the halls of academe, first as peripheral courses such as Canadian or Australian literature, before being moved from the margins to the canon. The literature of the Third World has likewise been marginalized in the classes devoted to the Commonwealth or the postcolonial with few incursions into the centre. Only now, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are courses in Aboriginal literature beginning to appear in Canadian universities, and, like their marginalized predecessors, they too are relegated to the periphery, waiting approval and acceptance from the centre. However, Fee contends that the current theories of literary criticism are inadequate because they reproduce the First-Third World binary in the Second-Fourth World relationship:

Critics must use all the knowledge they have gained from their own experiences as colonized to consider their role as colonizers, to interrogate their own political and psychological investments in reading Indigenous literature in ways that produce themselves as Subjects, the Indigene as Other, themselves as ordinary citizens of a self-evident nation, the Indigene as deviant or rebel. (p. 25)

Just as postcolonial critical theory challenged the notion of the colonized as ‘Other, deviant or rebel’, new critical theory must emerge that privileges the voice of Indigenous peoples. Just as postcolonial literary theory did not come from the centre but grew out of the lived experiences and literature of the postcolonial world, so too must Indigenous literary theory emerge from Indigenous literature. Increasingly, this process has begun in North America.

## **Envisioning Decolonization: Learning to Read Through Aboriginal Eyes**

Thomas King (1990) challenges the appropriateness of post-colonial theory as an interpretive lens for Aboriginal literature. He feels that postcolonialism remains centred in nationalism and ignores the literary traditions that preceded colonialism. He asserts “we need to find descriptors which do not invoke the cant of progress and which are not joined at the hip with nationalism” (p. 12). King advocates for the development of new terms and suggests “tribal, interfusional, polemical, and associational to describe the range of Native writing” (p. 12). King defines each of these terms:

Tribal refers to that literature which exists primarily within a tribe or a community, literature that is shared almost exclusively by members of that community, and literature that is presented and retained in a Native language.

Polemical refers to that literature either in a Native language or in English, French, etc. that concerns itself with the clash of Native and non-Native cultures or with the championing of Native values over non-Native values.

I’m using interfusional to describe that part of Native literature which is a blending of oral literature and written literature.

Associational literature is the body of literature that has been created, for the most part, by contemporary Native writers....Associational literature, most often, describes a Native community....[It concentrates] on the daily activities and intricacies of Native life and [organizes] the elements of plot along a rather flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature....associational literature leans toward the group rather than the single, isolated character, creating a fiction that de-values heroes and villains in favour of members of a community, a fiction which eschews judgements and conclusions. (pp. 12-14)

King iterates the need for an interpretive lens that understands and values the orality and traditions of Native cultures, and places those traditions, rather than colonial traditions, at the centre.

In examining how literary critics have dealt with Aboriginal literature, Kimberley Blaeser (1993) continues this argument, determining that the “worth of the literature is essentially validated by its demonstrated adherence to a respected literary mode, dynamic or style” (pp. 55-56). Blaeser feels that the time has come to develop critical theory that reflects the literature and the community out of which it is written. It is time to “search for a way to approach Native Literature from an Indigenous cultural context, a way to frame and enact a tribal-centred criticism” (p. 53). Aboriginal literature requires its own theory reflecting the fact that most works are “bi-cultural”, originate in an “oral-based culture”, and are “presented in the established literary and aesthetic forms of the dominant culture” (p. 56).

The hybrid nature of the literature reveals the shortcomings of Amer-European literary criticism and the theories of orality developed by Walter J. Ong (1982). Contemporary written literature, while incorporating features of traditional orature, is no longer traditional in the static sense of Aboriginal culture frequently held by Westerners. What is needed, then, according to Blaeser, is a critical theory that reflects the hybridity of the literature:

A critical voice and method which moves from the culturally-centred text outward toward the frontier of “border” studies, rather than an external critical voice and method which seeks to penetrate, appropriate, colonize or conquer the cultural center, and, thereby, change the stories or remake the literary meaning. (p. 53)

This development of a new theory of literary criticism can be seen as a further step in the decolonization process. Just as postcolonial theory was developed by the colonized and

began a decolonization process in the Third World, Aboriginal literary theory needs to be developed by Aboriginals and begin the process of decolonization in the Fourth World.

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (1998), in examining the role of Aboriginal academics, echoes Blaaser's call for an Indigenous literary theory. In Cook-Lynn's opinion, Aboriginal literature performs an important function in the Aboriginal world and needs to be read and critiqued in light of its purpose and effect. In her estimation, it is impossible to separate the production and the critiquing of Aboriginal literature:

Indian stories, traditions, and languages must be written, and they must be written in a vocabulary that people can understand rather than the esoteric language of French and Russian literary scholars that has overrun the lit/crit scene. Scholars in Native intellectual circles must resist the flattery that comes from many corners, defend freedom, refute rejection from various power enclaves, resist the superficiality that is so much a part of the modern/urban voice. We must work toward a new set of principles that recognizes the tribally specific literary traditions by which we have always judged the imagination. This distinguished legacy—largely untapped by critics, mainstream readers, and Native participants—is too essential to be ignored as we struggle toward the inevitable modernity of Native American intellectualism. (p. 137)

Acknowledging the need for an Aboriginal theory of literary criticism is a first step in the decolonization of Aboriginal literature; developing that theory is a second step. Academic Craig Womack (1999), a member of the Creek nation, in calling for American literary self-determination, begins to consider where this theory will find its roots. Womack begins with the specific: "one viable approach is to examine Creek authors to understand Creek texts" and from there the move can be made to examine "Native authors to understand Native textual production" (p. 4). Initially, Native voices must learn to speak for Native peoples because too frequently "Native people have been excluded from the discourse concerning their own cultures" (p. 5). For Womack, this

development of a Native literary criticism is rooted in resistance and decolonization. Like Blaeser, Womack recognizes the bi-cultural nature of Aboriginal literature and recognizes that “scholars of Native literature need to break down the oppositional thinking that separates orality and literacy wherein the oral constitutes authentic culture and the written contaminated culture” (p. 15).

What might a theory of literary criticism rooted in an Aboriginal world-view look like? Jace Weaver (1997), recognizing the importance of community in Aboriginal world view, presents a theory of communitism as a basis from which Aboriginal writers write and therefore the basis from which critics must read. Weaver contends that this sense of community, the relationships within that community, and its connection to place are what differentiates Western from Aboriginal thought and serves “as a countermythology to Amer-European myths that serve colonial interests” (p. 15). Alongside community in determining Native identity is the sense of place; “world view and religion are thus ‘bioregional,’ varying with the natural environment in which they evolved” (p. 28). This tie to the natural environment further reinforces Womack’s contention that literary criticism needs to begin with the tribal centre before being generalized to the larger Aboriginal community. Weaver calls for the development of literary theory that recognizes the importance and centrality of community in the Aboriginal world-view.

Weaver, in coining the term communitism to describe his literary theory, not only recognizes the power of community as a centre for Aboriginal peoples, he also recognizes the powerful role literature plays in healing:

Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to the Native community...to promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them. (p. 43)

Examining Aboriginal literature without consideration of the cultural and historical realities of the Aboriginal community may lead to continued marginalization. However, “communitism means more than merely ‘community.’ It involves a particular way of attempting to live in communities as Natives” (p. 162). The geographical and physical communities may vary widely, but the spiritual community forms the centre from which communitism radiates.

Traditional storytelling was community and relationship centred and transformative because the listener was an active participant in the story. Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez (1999), comparing this interaction to a conversation, contends that the same conversation can take place if literary texts are constructed in a conversive way. de Ramirez, like Womack and Weaver, develops literary criticism that is grounded in Aboriginal tradition. Like Weaver, de Ramirez coins a new term, conversive, to describe the theory. The label, conversive, reflects the conversational aspects of the traditional storytelling as the potential for conversion through the transformative and regenerative power of the story (pp. 6-7). de Ramirez contends that recognizing the conversive nature of American Indian texts demands a different approach to reading. Because of the relationality and connectedness of community, objectification is not possible. When critics use scholarly literary traditions that develop from the centre of Aboriginal traditions, the literature itself can be liberated and liberating; de Ramirez found this liberation in the traditions of oral storytelling where the process becomes more important than the product or theory, and

the reader is involved in a process of interacting with the text and developing understanding.

Duane Niatum (1993) describes the connection between the past and the oral: “the words are the carriers of the culture from past generations to the present, and on into the future. The values of the tribe are fused into the songs and stories” (p .65). Niatum identifies four values central to Aboriginal world view and reflected in Aboriginal poetry. These four values, which form the core of his critical approach to Aboriginal poetry, are continuity, wholeness, the idea of place, and kinship. Niatum uses these values to constitute a critical lens when reading Aboriginal poetry and illustrates how they provide a tool for the interpretation of individual poems.

Jo-Ann Episkenew (2002) explains that many academics are not comfortable with Aboriginal literature because of “its apparent lack of academic sophistication and complexities in the conventional sense” (p. 52). This seeming lack of sophistication and complexity combines with the ideology scholars bring to their reading of the text (p. 54) to create dis-ease and difficulty with interpretation using conventional critical lenses. Episkenew contends that

no matter how well-intended, interpretations that lack a fundamental understanding of Aboriginal people as victims of colonization can inadvertently become weapons of colonization themselves because their authors’ voices become the voices of authority, authority which could easily overpower the voices of Aboriginal people. (p. 56)

The text cannot be separated from the context, so Episkenew invites “scholars to leave the ivory tower and talk to Aboriginal people” (p. 65). Renate Eigenbrod also calls on

critics of Aboriginal literature to look for the connections. She uses Jace Weaver's term in her call for "Indigenizing" the study of literature:

To "Indigenize" the study of Indigenous literatures means to respect the connectedness that Indigenous artists and writers name as their source of inspiration in approaches which are in themselves connected – with different disciplines, languages and discourses and reaching out into Aboriginal communities. (p. 83)

Janice Acoose (2001) brings us back to the words of Craig Womack as she challenges us to

seek out a literary criticism that focuses on Native resistance movements against colonization, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty and Native nationalism, seeks connections between literature and liberation struggles, and, finally, roots literature in land and culture. (p. 51)

Acoose, when teaching Aboriginal literature, uses "the texts as tools for confronting colonialism and locating spaces for decolonization" (p. 52).

Aboriginal theorists have entered uncharted waters as they attempt to build a bridge between the academic study of literature and the rich cultural traditions of Aboriginal North Americans. Although Aboriginal writers have been creating literature, current critical theories have too frequently led to further marginalization of an already marginalized group. Providing ways of reading to honour the traditions that underpin the text begins a process of decolonization. Just as postcolonial theory has provided new possible readings for postcolonial and Amer-European texts, Aboriginal criticism will provide new possibilities and readings for Aboriginal and other texts.



## **Pedagogical Challenges: Decolonizing the High School English Classroom**

Understanding the colonizing effect of the literary canon and Amer-European forms of literary criticism should act as a catalyst for exploring how the teaching of English can be reformed and can begin to act as a decolonizing agent. The first step in this decolonization begins with the selection of literature. When choosing texts for study, teachers must consider whether or not the dominant culture's notions of power and privilege are exemplified by the texts and further supported by readings of the texts. In addition, teachers must consider the demographics of their student population to ensure that no marginalized group is further marginalized by the texts. However, providing students with a variety of approaches or critical lenses through which to read literature can counterbalance the effect of reading texts that have had a colonizing influence in the traditional literature classroom.

In many instances, because of budgetary constraints or curricular restrictions, teachers do not have a great deal of choice in the literature they teach; they must select literature that is currently in the storeroom or on the approved reading list. How then can these texts be approached in a way that diminishes their colonizing potential? How can these texts be made relevant to students who are disenfranchised by the text?

Carol Ricker-Wilson (1998) faced this issue when she chose to teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) in a grade eleven classroom in an inner city Toronto high school. She framed her teaching of the novel with concurrent studies in African and Afro-North American history to round out the view of Afro-Americans perpetuated by the text. Yet

although the white students in her class were able to emerge from their engagement with the texts with their “racial identities unscathed,” the black students were demoralized: “the mockingbird had become their albatross” (p. 70). Ricker-Wilson concludes that no one text can be used to examine issues of representation and social justice without disenfranchising a portion of the student population. However, a diversity of texts taught together can provide a more inclusive view of the issues. In reading the texts, students must explore “who tells the story and how it is told” (p. 72) to understand the privileging of viewpoint that occurs and is frequently accepted. In other words, students need to become critical and reflective readers, not accepting without question an author’s voice or a teacher’s interpretation.

Students can be given the tools to become critical and reflective readers of literature if they are exposed to the theories of literary criticism and shown how they can use these theories to understand literature beyond the surface story. Allan Luke (2000) and Henry Giroux (2005) are concerned that the cultural and historical foundations of literary theory go unacknowledged. Luke argues that in the practices of making meaning from text “readers’ schemata and background knowledge are not in the first instance individual differences, but can be viewed as cultural, community-specific and gendered ideologies developed through preschool linguistic and literate socialization” (p. 455). Giroux suggests that these ideologies be countered by providing students with the opportunity to

engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages. This means educating the students to both read these codes historically and critically while simultaneously learning the limits of such codes, including the ones they use to create their own narrative histories. (p. 21)

This can be done by giving students the “opportunities to read texts that both affirm and interrogate the complexities of their own histories,” “looking at the elements that produce [texts] within established circuits of power,” and analyzing “how students from different social formations and locations might read texts differently and why” (pp. 22-23).

Lisa Schade (1996) attempted to help her students develop these understandings. By teaching literature through theory, she feels that she is helping students ‘demystify’ the text and its interpretation. Through the introduction of various critical theories, students are able to “see *how* the interpretations they’ve always been handed are devised” (p. 31, italics in the original).

Mary Beth Hines and Deborah Appleman (2000) conducted pedagogical research in three secondary English classrooms. The teacher in one of the classrooms they observed taught through critical theories or critical lenses. In this classroom the view of

teaching literature gradually shifted from teaching literature as content to be mastered and memorized to using literature and literary theories as a way to encourage students to explore the promises and possibilities of interpretation. (p. 158)

The critical theories gave students the opportunity to construct meaning from the texts rather than accept the interpretations of the teacher.

Schade’s and Hines and Appleman’s case studies demonstrate the possibility of using literary theory as a critical lens in the secondary classroom. If teachers add postcolonial theory and introduce students to Aboriginal critical theory, the students will have two additional tools to use in the construction of meaning. A diversity of critical approaches

will enable students to approach a diversity of literature and critically consider who tells the story and how it is told. In this way, minority students can experience privilege and students from the dominant culture can begin to understand how canonical texts reinforce Amer-European values.

### **Conclusion**

Empowering students to make meaning using a diversity of lenses enables them to see the same text from several locations. Helen Hoy (2001) describes the process of critical reading as “a series of switchbacks on a mountain trail, from which it is possible to view the same tree, the same outcropping, not only first from below and then from above, but also from opposing directions” (p. 25).

The decolonization of the high school English classroom can begin with a critical examination of canon. Opening the canon to margins or creating counter-canon, however, is not enough. Students must be given critical skills to determine which works of literature belong in their personal canon and understand how readings of the same work can empower or dis-empower the reader. Exposing students to postcolonial and Aboriginal critical theories privileges students from non-Amer-European cultures and enables students from Amer-European cultures to understand how one world view has achieved dominance. We can begin to decolonize the study of English by renaming it the study of literature and orature, a course of study that opens the canon by welcoming works created by authors from every part of the globe and engages with those authors using critical theory that emerges from the literatures.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE SECOND FOUNDATIONAL STONE**

#### **Research Methodology**

##### **Introduction**

After several years of thought, courses, and conversations, the time to actually embark on the research had arrived. As I conceptualized my ideas and arrived at a research question, the larger question remained: what methodological research framework(s) fit this study? I hoped that participating in this research would have a lasting impact on the lives of teacher participants and would be emancipatory. Teaching Aboriginal literature without an appropriate critical framework is difficult and results in the literature either not being taught or being taught in a way that perpetuates stereotypes. For those teachers who wish to teach Aboriginal literature, I hypothesized that an appropriate approach would free them to engage with the literature in ways that did not perpetuate existing stereotypes. I needed to choose a research tradition that enabled me to work with and observe teacher participants as they engaged with literary theories and taught their students how to interpret literature using these lenses. I determined that qualitative methodologies best suited my research goals.

To achieve my research goals, I worked with two secondary English teachers who were using North American Aboriginal literature in their classrooms and were interested in looking at different ways of approaching this literature, enabling their students to arrive at understandings that did not reinforce current stereotypes. The research consisted of introducing the teachers to the lenses of postcolonialism and Aboriginal critical theory, engaging them in conversational interviews, and visiting their classrooms.

I felt strongly that the control of the classrooms and the class content must remain with the classroom teachers. Although this was my research project and I hoped that the teachers would benefit through their participation, they needed to feel that they had control of what happened in their classrooms. My incursions into their space would be limited and at their convenience. I also wanted their input in choosing the literature and designing the assignments and approaches that they felt would be most effective with their students.

### **Literary Scholarship**

Reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of this work, this study used several methodological approaches. In order to explore contemporary literary critical theory, I used an approach familiar to literary scholars. For this section of the study, I examined and analyzed texts written by theorists in the areas of contemporary theories of literary criticism, including approaches through colonial and postcolonial discourse and the growing body of theory and criticism written by North American Aboriginals, to determine what interpretive strategies were currently used to make meaning of texts.

Because this study took place in secondary English classrooms, it was important that I also consider how theory as an analytical tool was used in secondary classrooms. To that end, I expanded my reading to include not only theorists but also individuals who applied theory to their practice. I then summarized and synthesized my understandings of the theories and how theory had been used in secondary classrooms into a background document<sup>6</sup> which was given to the participating teachers.

### **Action Research**

Because I wanted the teachers to have direct involvement in the design and implementation, I felt that this study fell within the paradigm of action research. Action research was an appropriate methodological approach for several reasons. Peter Reason (1988) describes action research as “research with and for rather than on a people [and] all those involved contribute both to the creative thinking and also contribute to the action” (p. 1). Because my research involved the implementation of new pedagogical approaches and the introduction of new content, the contributions of the teacher-participants were important. In addition, the goal of this research was to introduce teachers to culturally sensitive methods of reading Aboriginal literature and to provide students with additional tools for unpacking texts. The teachers involved in this research were participants, not subjects. The teachers were in control of their classrooms, the selections of literature studied, and the involvement of the students. Because they were the enactors of the models, ownership of the process needed to be shared.

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<sup>6</sup> The background document was an earlier version of the previous chapter.

Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis (1983) describe action research as a “self reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting” (p. 152). Like Reason (1988), Carr and Kemmis recognize the emancipatory nature of action research:

Action research should be seen as an embodiment of democratic principles in research, allowing participants to influence, if not determine, the conditions of their own lives and work, and collaboratively to develop critiques of social conditions which sustain dependence, inequality or exploitation in any research enterprise in particular, or in social life in general. (p. 153)

The marginalizing of Aboriginals is a social condition that supports inequality, an inequality that the Saskatchewan teachers are mandated to address. By providing teachers with additional approaches to literature through critical lenses, I hoped to enable them to aid their students in understanding the roots of marginalization and the way in which practices of marginalization are unquestioningly supported and repeated through social structures.

Carr and Kemmis (1983) contend that the central aims of action research are to improve and involve (p. 154). They focus on three areas of improvement. First, action research is concerned with the improvement of practice; this research study concerned itself with the improvement of the practice of teaching English. Second, action researchers hope to improve the understanding of the practice by its practitioners; the participating teachers improved their personal understandings of their classroom practices. Third, action researchers aim to improve the situation in which the practice takes place; the teaching situation improved as the participating teachers were validated in their approaches and gained confidence.



Carr and Kemmis (1983) also assert that participants are to be involved in all cycles of the research project: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The participating teachers were involved in planning the teaching units and their implementation. The teachers introduced the critical lenses to the class and reflected on their experiences and the experiences of their students. They shared these reflections with me through conversational interviews.

Action research, in its purest form, is a never-ending series of cycles. Following the reflective phase, planning again takes place in preparation for the next action phase. Ideally, action research takes place over an extended period of time and undergoes multiple revisions based on the experiences of the participants. My initial plan for this study allowed for the recursive process normally associated with action research, and I had hoped to run two cycles over the course of the semester. As is often the case when researcher plans are actualized, the plan did not fit the reality of classroom life. However, the process did not end with the conclusion of the formal research. Both participants have contacted me since the conclusion of the research study, and they continue to reflect on their experiences and modify their practices based on those reflections.

### **Selection of Participants**

The observations and understandings arising from this study focused on the experiences of two classroom teachers who introduced critical lenses and Aboriginal literature to their students. Although many qualitative studies deal with an *n* of one, I chose to work with

two teachers for several reasons. First, two teachers provided greater demographic variety in the student population. Second, working with two teachers increased the dialogical nature of the research. Through a combination of conversational interviews and planning meetings, the two participating teachers met and drew on our experiences, building ideas through dialogue.

This research was funded through the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation<sup>7</sup>, which supports research into effective teaching practices. Having two participating teachers had the potential to lead to more opportunities to disseminate the information and build a larger practical network after the completion of the study. Working with two teachers in two classrooms led to a great deal of data. For this reason, I limited my study to the two classrooms and focused on the teachers' experiences. The experiences of the students were reflected in the observations of the teachers but were not at the center of the research.

The two teacher participants were experienced secondary language arts teachers interested in using Aboriginal literature in their classrooms and in changing their pedagogical approaches. Each teacher conducted the research in a grade twelve English classroom in urban schools in Saskatchewan. The demographics of the two schools differed, with one school having a large percentage of Aboriginal students and the other school being more reflective of the urban Saskatchewan society. One teacher was of Aboriginal ancestry and the other was Euro-Canadian. I used purposive sampling in the

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<sup>7</sup> The McDowell Foundation is an independent charitable organization that was created by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation in response to teachers' needs for greater involvement in educational research. Its goal is to support inquiry, reflection, and the communication of information and ideas that improve education.

selection of teachers because I wanted teachers who used Aboriginal literature in their classrooms and were passionate about social justice issues. According to Goodson and Sikes (2001) purposive sampling is used when “the research is concerned with specific characteristics, attributes or experiences and informants are ‘selected’ because they meet the criteria” (p. 24).

The two teachers participating in this project entered into unique roles as co-researchers. They best understood their classrooms and the particular needs and learning styles of their students. As teacher-researchers, their “professionalism... is based on expertise in seeking to understand the world, including [their] own practice” (Hammersley, 1993, p. 428). Marilyn Hammersley contends that curricular ideas are to be tested through action, because they are the continually developing product of invention and reflection. This project offered teachers an opportunity to enter into the realm of invention and reflection.

### **Researcher Stance**

As principal researcher, I functioned in several different ways during the course of the research. First, I brought new ideas into the mix and provided a catalyst for the change that occurred as engaging in the research project moved the teachers from contemplation to action. Second, I brought another set of eyes to the classroom and was able to see in new and different ways what was familiar to the classroom teachers. Third, through conference presentations and publications, I was able to disseminate the findings of the research project beyond the participating classroom and school, an important step for the funding agency’s goal of improving teacher practice province-wide.

The principal researcher in an action research project is not a distanced, objective observer. My story is also an integral part of this research story. My experiences as a teacher in Inuit classrooms led me to my research questions. Those experiences are reflected in my interactions with the teachers, my interpretations of the data, and my construction of the narrative. Action research is political, and my interpretations and recommendations reflect the politics of marginalization, resistance, and social justice. My approach to education and belief in the transformative power of education echoes Paulo Freire's (1974) view of democratic education:

Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in men, on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion. (p. 38)

I hope that this research, which grew out of my identification of problems in Aboriginal education, will lead to creative discussions and acts of courage that transform teachers and students.

## **Life History**

Although I used the structure of participatory action research, I modified this form for several reasons such as the short time frame and the complexities of the participants' personal lives. Action research traditionally grows out of needs that a community identifies, and a research team is set in place to examine the problem and develop and test potential solutions. In this research study, I identified the problem and recruited the participants. For this reason, I considered additional research methodologies and narrowed my considerations to life history and the conversational interview.

Because my study focused on the experiences of the two teacher participants, life history (Goodson, 1991, 1992; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Meason & Sikes, 1992) influenced the methodological framework. The goal of life history is to ensure that “the teacher’s voice is heard, heard loudly and articulately” (Goodson, 1991, p. 36). To achieve this end, the relationships between individuals involved in the research must be built on trust and progress over the course of the research with the hope “that by the latter stages of the research, one may not be asking [structured] questions at all,” but be engaged in the free exchange of ideas and observations (Meason & Sikes, 1992, p. 214). Life history methodology seeks to ensure that teachers’ voices are made audible by leveling the playing field and ending “a culture of expertise and privilege for the researcher, alongside a culture of silencing, appropriation, and academic colonization for the researched” (Goodson, 2001, p. 72). These beliefs provided a strong supporting framework for the research. The building of trust was essential to the success of the conversational interviews and the emerging relationships among the three participants. The conversational interview format allowed each of us to share our stories and the influences that shaped our teaching philosophies. The presentation of the data ensures that the voices of the participants are clearly heard and that their contributions are both obvious and valued. In collaborating with these teachers on this research project, I interpreted and re-presented the lived experiences of a specific group of individuals in a specific context.

The life history methodology is also appropriate to this project’s connection to teacher practice through the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) note, “life history work also has considerable potential as a strategy for personal and professional development, thus furthering an individual’s own self-understanding” (p.

57). Self-reflection and self-understanding are frequently recognized as indicators of good teaching practice. Through this study, three educators (two classroom teachers and the principal researcher) had the opportunity to improve their teaching practices through reflection and interpretation.

### **Data Collection**

For this study I found that conversation was of paramount importance. Conversational interviews (Patton, 1980) with the participating teachers were my primary method of data collection. Allan Feldman (1999) regards conversation as a key element in participatory action research, going so far as to suggest that the conversations are a research methodology in and of themselves. Feldman sees these interviews as part of the hermeneutic circle:

As participants engage in conversation they come to new understandings that shape their responses and the direction of the conversation, which leads to different understandings of the conversation itself and the subject(s) of the conversation.... Conversation can lead to action, follow action, or be part of action. Through the intermingling of conversation and action, praxis comes about with its growth of knowledge, understanding, and theory through action. (pp. 132-133)

### **Practical Framework**

After I had chosen methodological frameworks, the time had come to select research participants. Because of the qualitative nature of the project, I determined, in consultation with my committee, that two teacher participants would be the most appropriate. I chose to find one participant of Aboriginal ancestry and another who was representative of Saskatchewan middle-class urban society. Both teachers needed to have

a desire to teach Aboriginal literature, to be interested in antiracist education, to be willing to explore alternative teaching methodologies, and to be teaching the A30 (Canadian Literature) section of the Saskatchewan English Language Arts curriculum (1999). Members of my committee also suggested that, if possible, I work with teachers who were at the beginning of their careers. They felt that these teachers had the greatest potential to initiate change amongst their peers. Through funding provided by the Dr. Stirling McDowell foundation, I was able to offer the participants some classroom release time to participate in the research.

In December 2003, the Advisory Committee of Ethics in Behavioural Science Research approved the research proposal (Appendix D). While waiting for ethics approval, I made enquiries to find teachers who would be interested in participating in this process. Serendipity proved to be the most effective means of soliciting participants. In a casual conversation with an acquaintance while at a Halloween party, he inquired into the topic of my research. As I sketched out what I hoped to do, he replied, “You need to talk to my wife. This is the kind of thing that she would be interested in.” After conversing with several committee members, I determined that I had a strong potential candidate. Shannon<sup>8</sup> had completed a Master of Arts in English and a Bachelor of Education degree and had done coursework with some of my committee members. She was remembered as a strong student with an analytical mind who was passionate about social justice issues. She had graduated from the College of Education within the last 10 years and was acknowledged as a distinguished graduate. She was currently teaching English in a large

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all participants, including students, programs, schools, and communities to protect their anonymity.

urban high school with a decidedly middle class population. The time had come to make the phone call.

Shannon was eager to be one of the participating teachers. She wanted to teach Aboriginal literature and challenge her students and her peers to rethink their positions. She had used postcolonial theory in some of her Masters coursework and wished to teach in a postcolonial way. She was engaged in projects that explored Aboriginal issues, specifically the effects of uranium mining on the Dene community on Great Bear Lake. In addition to her classroom interests, Shannon was hungry for a professional development experience that would both challenge and push her. As a part-time teacher and the mother of two active toddlers, she felt the need to engage with challenging ideas that would feed her professionally and personally. Participant one was named.

The second participant, a teacher of Aboriginal ancestry, proved to be somewhat more difficult to locate. Most Aboriginal educators teach in the elementary school systems and few have chosen to teach at the secondary level. Although I initially had one teacher in mind, she received leave to complete her Masters of Education at the time I would be conducting my research. Serendipity again came into play. One of my co-advisors sent an email to a former student wondering if she happened to know of an Aboriginal educator teaching English A30. We were in luck; a second potential candidate was identified. This time email contact was made. Kate was very interested in participating in the research but unsure of her qualifications as an Aboriginal educator. The daughter of a Métis mother and a white father, she had been raised without knowledge of her Aboriginal roots. Only as an adult had she learned of her Aboriginal heritage. Although



raised in a white world, as an adult and a teacher, Kate was very cognizant of the unearned advantage afforded her by her upbringing. Having grown up in a community with a large Aboriginal population and serious racist patterns of interaction and now teaching in that same community, she was very aware of the issues and concerned with changing the stereotypes of students and privileging the voices of the Aboriginal students.

Since meeting Kate and working with her, I have become increasingly aware of the number of individuals of Aboriginal ancestry who are in positions similar to hers. The scoops<sup>9</sup> of the 1950s and 1960s and the inherent racism of our society resulted in many Aboriginal individuals and families blending into the dominant culture if at all possible. Warren Cariou (2003), after learning that his grandmother was Métis, concludes that the family silence

was not at all surprising, given the prejudices against Native people and against the Metis in particular during her life time. She was born within a generation of Louis Riel's execution, and raised in an era when Metis people had many reasons to disguise their heritage if they could. For a long time after the North West Rebellion, the Metis were considered traitorous, untrustworthy, savage. Officially, the government treated the Metis as if they didn't exist, saying that they should choose to be either white or Indian. (pp. 220-221)

Kate's story is one of many and her experiences provided her with a different view of the issues.

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<sup>9</sup> The scoops refer to the deliberate removal by social service agencies of Aboriginal children from their homes and the subsequent placement in white foster and adoptive families. Social workers of the time no doubt felt that they had the best interests of the children at heart.

Once the research participants were identified, I sent letters to the respective boards of education requesting permission to conduct the research. After permission was granted, in January 2004, initial meetings with each of the participants occurred. I met individually with each participant in a local coffee shop where we spent some time getting to know each other. These meetings were not recorded or transcribed. This was an opportunity for each of us to ask questions of the other, share our ideas about education, speak of our classroom experiences, our families, our value systems, and our lived experiences, and make a final decision about involvement in the research project. At this time I provided each of the participants with a copy of my literature review.

Within two weeks of the initial meeting with each participant, I again met them individually. At this time, I conducted the first formal interviews. These roughly two-hour sessions took the shape of conversational interviews with a few guiding questions for direction (Appendix B). During this time Kate and Shannon were able to describe their classrooms, the demographics of their schools, their teaching philosophies, what they hoped to gain from participation in the study, and their reasons for being interested in this research.

After I conducted the individual interviews, we met as a group to give the two research participants the opportunity to meet and, in that forum, discuss ideas. The time flew by. Lunch together in a local restaurant gave Shannon and Kate an informal opportunity to get to know one another, and we then moved to a nearby apartment for more formal discussions. Around a kitchen table, a space that invited conversation, the next three hours passed quickly. During that time, we covered many topics; our discussion was

facilitated by the conversational interview approach. This time there were no guiding questions. The transcripts from this session were rich as each of us explored our relationship to the others and thought of ways in which to enact the theoretical teaching of Aboriginal literature in the classroom. The excitement was tangible as was the fear. We were moving into new territory. How would we work together? Was this idea going to work? Would Kate and Shannon feel safe with a researcher in their classrooms? During this time, we tried to determine the shape that the research would take:<sup>10</sup>

**Geraldine:** How do we want to structure this? Do we want to talk about theoretical perspectives? How we're going to introduce students to different tool kits? Interpreting in different ways? What do we want them to know of postcolonialism and Aboriginal lit crit.

**Shannon:** Let's get started, let's get down and dirty. What are we going to do? What's our timeframe? What do you want us to do?

**Geraldine:** Well, here's my vision at this point in time. I'd like to think about ways we can give kids these interpretive tools to read from non-Eurocentric perspectives. How are we going to introduce that to them? Are we going to tell them that it's a theoretical perspective? Are we going to talk about the fact that we always use a theoretical perspective to interpret text whether we know what it is or not? Reader response is sometimes the big one, but it might be our own life story and life history that we use to interpret texts, our stereotypes, those things that teachers have told us about what is good literature and what is not good literature and how to look for symbols. What do we want to tell them? Do we want to call it theory? Or do we just want to tell them about the kinds of things we want them to be looking for in the text?

Where do we want to go next? One option would be that I meet with each of you independently to talk about what you're going to do in your classroom and set it up, or you can just kind of go and fly with something and tell me, "OK Geraldine, this is what I'm doing, come have a look." Do you need some time to – I often need percolating time. I have all these ideas bouncing around in my head, and I need some time to start thematically mapping what I'm going to do and what my ideas are and how this might work with my kids.

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<sup>10</sup> In order to differentiate the three voices that make up these conversations, I have chosen to represent each speaker with her own font. The fonts remain consistent throughout the document.

**Kate:** For me that part is just a matter of slotting and making a decision, is it this or this? But I'm still thinking, so I need like a packet of theory so that I know enough to tell them.

**Shannon:** It would really help me to have like a sheet run off of definitions of each of the theories that we actually present to them, because for me I can't seem to – like for me postcolonial literature or theory – I have a number of things that jump into my mind, but I don't know how to prioritize or link them.

**Kate:** Also then we'd all be agreed, that we'd done what we were...

**Shannon:** And something that we could, that the students could have in their hands, that we could listen for echoes of in their work. I trust too much things we can't see. I trust, if I approach things in this way and they're with me for 100 hours, they'll at least get it intuitively. And I haven't made this leap before of making these things really explicit.

As it turned out, the research took on a very different shape in each classroom and with each participant. My first classroom visit was in Shannon's classroom where the students were inattentive and resistant. Although she had an excellent lesson prepared, they were not engaged, and her frustration was tangible. As a result of that initial classroom visit, our relationship developed very much outside the classroom. We met a number of times over coffee and discussed the ideas and how she was approaching them in her classroom. We developed a unit together and searched for appropriate materials. Finally, I returned to her classroom for two consecutive days in a co-teaching role. In total, we met over coffee or lunch five times, and I visited her classroom three times. The times when we met individually were recorded and transcribed and became part of my collected data.

My initial visit to Kate's classroom went smoothly. Her students, eager to be part of a research project, hoped that they would be quoted in my book. Initially, they were very

aware of my presence in the classroom but as my visits occurred weekly, I soon became a normal part of the environment. They were happy to share with me and released copies of their assignments as part of my data. Because Kate's A30 class occurred after lunch, I would usually join her for lunch in the staff room and then move to her classroom. Occasionally I would meet with her after school to do some planning. I visited Kate's classroom eight times and had two recorded conversational interviews.

We did not meet together at Easter as planned to review our units and reshape them because each teacher had developed her unit and their approaches to incorporating the theory reflected the literature they had chosen and their individual teaching styles. Coordinating the schedules of two teachers who were very involved in the activities of their schools and the lives of their families also proved to be difficult. Finally, I determined that the teachers needed more time to explore the approaches and work with their students before they could revise what they were doing and begin a new cycle. As a result of this decision, the research did not go through the multiple cycles normally associated with action research.

At the end of the school year, the three of us again met to discuss the research project and compare our experiences. Eating lunch together gave us an opportunity to relax and become reacquainted, four months after our initial joint meeting. We then met in a classroom to share our stories, an environment that was not as conducive to conversation as the kitchen table of our first meeting. Although the format of the research evolved differently at each site, the experiences of the two participants were similar. Each was frustrated by the inability of students to move from learned knowledge to applied

knowledge. It did not seem that the attitudes of the students were significantly changed. Both teachers were also frustrated by the lack of support from their colleagues and the perpetuation of the status quo by their colleagues and their systems. Engagement with the curriculum and acknowledgement of the mandates of the new curriculum document (Sask. Learning, 1999) seemed to be largely ignored.

In the fall, I again met with each teacher individually to discuss how involvement in the research project influenced her planning for the current school year. For both teachers, the impact was profound. Each felt validated in her desire to teach Aboriginal literature and to work on raising the consciousness of her students. They also wanted to engage their colleagues in meaningful discussions about the possible approaches to teaching Aboriginal literature through the lenses of criticism.

All interviews with Kate and Shannon were recorded and transcribed. Conversational interviews are often rambling and frequently involve speakers changing tracks in the middle of articulating a thought. I had initially planned to use selective transcription, transcribing only those elements that pertained directly to the research questions. However, I discovered that seemingly unrelated segues often contained an important thought or were central to understanding a larger portion of the conversation. As a result, I transcribed the interviews in their entirety. The transcripts were then sent to Shannon and Kate for their perusal and approval. They made corrections to the transcripts, filling in details that I misheard. They also chose to delete portions of the transcripts that they felt were too personal. They signed data release forms and returned them with the edited transcripts. Kate also provided me with copies of student work. All students who agreed

to allow me to quote from their work also signed release forms. Those students who were under 18 years of age also had their release forms signed by a parent or guardian.

Finally, I was left with piles of data and three stories that needed to be told, Kate's, Shannon's, and mine. As I have told these research stories, I have tried to ensure that the voices of the participants are heard. To this end, I have quoted extensively from the transcripts. I have also edited the transcripts to improve the flow of the language and eliminate the segues and comments that detracted from the over all clarity of the document. Each participant was provided with a copy of the document for her comments and to ensure that my representation of her story was accurate.

The conclusion of the research was not the conclusion of the conversation; in fact, in many ways, it had just begun. Although the stories told in this dissertation reflect the experiences off three educators' engagement with Aboriginal literature and literary theory in two grade twelve classrooms, the stories do not end here. Each participant continues to reflect on the experience and modify teaching practices because of this engagement. This document, like an inukshuk, marks one moment in time and lets others know that we have passed this way and left one small marker on the landscape.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE FIRST LAYER OF STONES**

#### **The Co-Researchers' Life Histories and Present Circumstances**

##### **Kate Brass's Story**

Kate Brass taught English in a large high school in a small urban centre,<sup>11</sup> and her decision to be part of the study grew out of her own love of learning and desire to improve her teaching and the learning experiences of her students. Initially when I asked her why she wanted to be part of the study, she responded with the following:

Personally, survival. To think a little higher, to be involved in research. And to get the students to think about some of the things I'm trying to tell them anyway. Different ways of approaching reading, that there's not just one way. I think they could get a lot out of this. Chance for all of us to - I'm not under the impression that they'll be reflecting like I will, but they'll have to, right. And I guess in terms of content, they would be doing this literature in my classroom and hopefully heightening their consciousness.

However, upon further reflection, Kate sent me this email:

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<sup>11</sup> The school enrollment exceeds 1500 while the population of the community is approximately 40,000.



You asked me, Geraldine, what I hoped to gain from this study. This and that, I answered, truthfully, but not completely. That evening in the bathtub, I knew - it reverberated - what do I hope? To give Rosie George a voice.

In his forward to Maria Campbell's *Stories of the Road Allowance People* Ron Marken writes, "To have voice is to have power... to be dumb or voiceless is synonymous with being ignorant." So I tell you about Rosie George.

My first five years of school were spent at Queen Anne School. My grade five teacher was Mrs. Jacques. On the playground I played with my white friends like I was supposed to. I was white after all. In the classroom were three Aboriginal kids as I recall. The boy, an absolute loner, was an artist. Yes, it was Christine Baker, with the pack of 64 pencil crayons (or was it only 32 back then?) and her pastel ponies, that was generally acknowledged as the class artist. But I recognized it - didn't we all? - that this boy's art was of a different sort - the eagles, bears and wolves. Then there was this girl whose name I can't recall. She must have been less troublesome to Mrs. Jacques than Rosie, or maybe it was just Rosie's presence that causes me to recall her so distinctly. She was tall, obviously older than the rest of us - a young woman, it seems to me now. Maybe it was also the matronly clothes she wore - the pink shell and maroon - what were they? - stretchy pants or jumper. I suspected the clothes came from the Salvation Army - where my mom worked. They helped the unfortunate kids from the residence.

I never knew what the residence was (were they orphans like my mother?), knew only that they weren't like us; they were quiet, and, for some reason, they - especially Rosie - made Mrs. Jacques angry.

Now that I think of it, everyone I knew in town with "Jacques" as a surname is Métis, but I don't remember what Mrs. Jacques looked like (they were neighbours, but he died early, leaving Mrs. Jacques alone), and I didn't know her maiden name. She

thought I was wonderful, though. My parents were good people - Salvation Army - I was a neat obedient child who loved to read and write.

My clearest memory of grade 5 - apart from that boy's art - was Rosie being called upon in class (did this happen once or regularly?). She stood by her desk, tall, round-shouldered, head bowed - couldn't or wouldn't answer, and Mrs. Jacques ridiculed her. I don't remember the words, barely recall the tone, but I see it - FEEL it - all so clearly. I've relived this moment, wondered what happened to Rosie, felt the hot shame and indignation in my head and chest many times. Say something, Rosie!

The next year we moved to Meadow View and I went to John Alexander School - white, no Indians, higher standards of marking, a teacher told me. Alexander and the Bill of Rights. Today John Alexander School is a "community school" - that raises fear in some of the whites who send their kids there - will they get lice from all those kids in the apartments nearby? You have to move to Meadow Heights and to a different school to avoid that. Queen Anne is now an office complex, the Indian Student residence is part of a reserve, and Mrs. Jacques, who lived across from Queen Anne, is dead. I don't know where Rosie George is, and I wouldn't dare speak for her, but I want a space for her voice.

With that powerful narrative, Kate welcomed me into her school and her classroom. Although Kate has been a classroom teacher only for the past five years, she brings a great deal of life experience to her classroom and this study. Before returning to the university for her Bachelor of Education degree, Kate received a Bachelor of Arts degree and completed the course work for a Master of Arts degree in Sociology. She taught undergraduate courses at a major Canadian university and English as a second language overseas and in Canada, and at a First Nations college. Her diversity of experiences, her

school setting and her personal background made Kate an ideal participant in this research.

Kate taught in a school with a significant Aboriginal student body situated in a community with a large Aboriginal population. Tensions exist in both the community and the school as issues of racism, poverty, and exclusion are always visible and provide an undercurrent that runs through both local politics and educational decisions. Kate knows this town well because she grew up here, went to school here, and has chosen to return here. As a woman of Métis ancestry, Kate grappled with issues of racism and exclusion as she attempted to understand her identity.

Kate's mother and her family are of Métis heritage, a fact which, as I indicated earlier, Kate only discovered as an adult. Her mother, together with one brother, was raised by her grandparents in a rural community. When Kate's mother married a white man, they severed ties with her family, moved to a new community, and raised their children in the white society. As adults, Kate and her sister have searched for their ancestral roots, made connections with a cousin, and considered their roles in society. A reflection of the endemic racism of the time, and perhaps of the present, Kate's mother firmly believed she did what was necessary to provide her daughters with the quality of life she was denied as a young woman. The fact that her daughters were able to complete secondary and post-secondary schooling in an era when few individuals of Aboriginal ancestry were able to do so and subsequently were able to fit well into middle class society attests to the success of her choices in meeting her goals. However, now, as an adult, Kate wondered about her responsibility to society, to the Métis and other Aboriginal people, and to her

daughter. And Kate struggled with the issue of declaring her heritage and perhaps applying for Métis status.

Kate's high school is the largest school in her community and serves the urban centre as well as the surrounding rural area. As in any school community, hers has positive and negative aspects, which Kate identifies:

Good thing being that you can always find, in a large community, a group that you feel akin to, that will support you in the way you see your role, the way you see your classroom, that you would like your school to function. And then like any organization or any bureaucracy, there are the organizational constraints and the things that don't make you happy that you have to deal with, and I guess like in any community maybe you focus on those a bit too much. But I think overall this is a community dedicated to trying to help.

Kate's relationships with other staff members and the school bureaucracy were sources of both joy and frustration. Although Kate indicated that this was a community dedicated to trying to help, the supports for various programs are unequal, and the administration is often uneasy with shifting the status quo. Teachers came to work with a diversity of perspectives and experiences, adding to the divisions and factions. The roadblocks imposed by administrators were often the source of Kate's frustration, and suggestions for changes that would address diversity and systemic racism were often met with resistance.

I spent four months as a frequent visitor in Kate's grade 12 Canadian literature classroom. This class met right after lunch, five days a week, and, as Kate described them, "they are a lively bunch." There were 24 students in the class, 13 males and 11

females. Six of the students were in grade 11, and the remaining 18 were in grade 12 and anticipating graduating at the end of the semester. None of the students was from a visible minority, although several self-identified as having Aboriginal or Métis heritage. One student was on an exchange from Germany. Interestingly, the vocal element in the class was male, described by Kate as “the vocal white male hockey element.” Over the course of the semester, it was obvious that this group held considerable power and that few other students were willing to challenge their world views.

Kate had clear goals for the students in her class. She hoped by the time they left that they would be able to write well and that they would have some new strategies for reading. And then there were the goals surrounding content. Through the literature she chose to teach, Kate hoped to expose them to a range of texts that they might not otherwise necessarily have come into contact with. She hoped they would develop an appreciation for literature and expand their perceptions:

Then it's kind of about the content. They will probably never again read Marilyn Dumont or Beth Cuthand or Shakespeare and *Hamlet* if it's in B30 [world literature]. There's a whole lot of stuff outside their experience that I want them to get and to enjoy through literature. I guess that's appreciation for literature. And then the third thing is, and I'm not there telling them what to do, but I don't know, maybe it's a way of thinking or doing. If you've read this literature by somebody whose experience is not yours, that makes you - I hope that makes you - see the world in a little bit different way. I guess maybe that's critical thinking or something. And maybe that it propels you to do something if you see... What we're really doing half the time in A30 [Canadian literature], we're talking about inequality. Not that I'm going to come stand in front of the

classroom and say don't ever listen to those jokes again, but if they know the classroom is a place where that is...

Kate and I both agreed that we hoped our classrooms would raise the level of social consciousness of our students, that they were challenged to action, that they would become different, more humane human beings, who think and see beyond where they are now. We hoped exposing them to the interpretive strategies of postcolonialism and Aboriginal critical theory would help them move in this direction.

For most of her life, Kate had been concerned with oppression and issues of marginalization. Her discovery of her own heritage had heightened this awareness but brought a new set of concerns to her approach. In her words, “about as close to firm ground as I can get is to take the side of the oppressed because if there is any truth, that’s getting closer to the truth.” Kate was also cognizant of striking a balance and setting the historical context. Although she began with the school canon, she moved beyond the canon to the literatures of marginalized people, including Aboriginals:

So I know that when I teach, we start out and I say these are dead white British guys. We start out with that kind of literature, but I'm always careful to say, don't leave here - and you can see this more clearly when I teach media studies - don't leave here thinking there's a big conspiracy and everybody is committed, plotting evil and here's the oppressed. Everything I teach is this is what these people understood, and wrote because of who they were and their position in society, and this is what they understood, and while they did this, a whole bunch of people were suffering, so now let's look at this experience. I cannot imagine another way of presenting stuff, teaching anything outside of that social and historical context, but that's because of where I came from.

Changes in the school structure have challenged Kate's ability to use her own experiences to highlight the issues of postcolonialism. In her own words, her classes have become whiter. This demographic change was a result of alternate programming in the high school. As in many schools with high Aboriginal populations, student retention was a major concern. Central High School has tackled this issue by creating a parallel stream, the Northern Lights program, for students deemed at risk. Originally this program was open to students in grades 10 and 11, and it had recently been expanded to include grade 12. Those students who had found success in this program were no longer returning to the regular program to complete grade 12. As well, as more Aboriginal students had found success in the Northern Lights program, fewer were choosing the regular classrooms. The end result of this choice was the emergence of two schools within one building, largely based on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ethnicity. This had profoundly affected Kate's willingness to self-identify as Aboriginal:

*And now it has become more complex when I present literature by Aboriginal authors and now that my classes are getting whiter - I used to be quite free talking about our roots and cultural roots, talking about personal identity, but for some people if they heard that about my identity, they'd say, "Yeah, that's why we have to do all this Indian stuff, she's Métis."*

Kate had also become aware that other classrooms did not look the same as hers, and other teachers rarely touched Aboriginal issues. Those teachers with whom she felt a kinship had similar things going on and challenged the stereotypes. She believed that other classrooms did not, and those teachers "probably think I cross the line." Although there were teachers with whom Kate identified, there were also students who identify with Kate:

And I know that you get labeled and my group and the kids that love the class most are the garden people. They're the kids in the school who try not to wear brand names and probably smoke dope and are the alternative kids.

These nonconformists were probably attracted to Kate and her class because of the way she interpreted the Saskatchewan curriculum. She saw the curriculum as mandating an approach to literature that called for social activism:

**Kate:** It's not just us as people but the curriculum is saying teach - I mean, where do we end up in B30? With conformity and nonconformity. The curriculum is saying anti-racism, not just multiculturalism but anti-racism, not just tolerate, not just tolerate homosexuals, but eradicate homophobia, that's in the curriculum.

**Geraldine:** It's in our curriculum but definitely not in our society.

**Kate:** And maybe not in our book rooms either.

The eradication of homophobia and racism were key issues at Central. Efforts to begin a Gay-Straight Alliance had been met with resistance and students of Aboriginal ancestry were in their own program, for the most part physically separated from the rest of the student body. Although Aboriginal students had claimed the student lounge as their own, and non-Aboriginals rarely entered that space, the students in Kate's class seemed to perceive racism as an issue about blacks that happened in the States or as a "that was then, but this is now" reality. Kate's experience during a recent study of Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973) illustrated the ways in which students historicized racism:

And now in this class, this A30, we have students in the class who are Métis, but we're not going to hear from the kids who aren't here in the class. And I always want to guard against presenting us as a museum piece. And I think, and it was in part because the intern was doing *Halfbreed* and I wasn't, I think



they were a little bit under the impression that that was then and this is now. And I will always be trying to make the connections to today, and I hope they make those for themselves.

Kate hoped that providing her students with alternative interpretive strategies, and teaching them to read through the lenses of postcolonial and Aboriginal theory would help them make connections between the literature and their lives. As she considered the critical approaches and their connections to the curriculum, she concluded that Saskatchewan Learning's philosophy mandated a postcolonial approach not only to the literature we teach, but to the way we teach. Although Kate was quite confident in her understanding of postcolonial theory, she was struggling with Aboriginal literary theory and with using it as a lens to interpret the literature. This led us into a conversation about language as resistance and as access to power:

**Kate:** And then from the theoretical, I'm trying to make the move from postcolonial to Aboriginal theory and where is it different. And if the emphasis is more on getting the land and the culture and the whole storytelling thing and I guess I'm just trying to work out in my mind and I'm thinking where is the theory that doesn't exist, but it does exist. But it could be more clear in my mind.

**Geraldine:** And I'm with you there. Sometimes I think where is it? But it's really emerging and I have to keep thinking, where does it fit and where does it come from? But I think that section on land and culture, the idea of finding voice, the role of community, and social activism and again postcolonialism has that sort of resistance literature. We go from the - we're going to create literature, the mimic men, and we're going to do it just like they did it in the British Empire and we're going to prove that we're just as good as everybody else to - wait a second, we have our own voice, we have our own issues, we need to be able to write from that perspective. We're not speaking the English of the Empire; we're speaking the English of our time and place. That whole need to rework language so it's a language that reflects who we are and where we are.

**Kate:** Like Maria Campbell and the way she is writing now.

Although Kate had the interest and the passion to explore issues of language and introduce Aboriginal literature to her students, she was also riddled with self-doubt about her suitability to be involved. She questioned her understanding of the theoretical perspectives and her connection to the Aboriginal community. Like many Aboriginals born in the 1960s and successful in school, Kate felt disconnected from her community. Whether isolated by the scoops or by choices made by parents, this was a group searching for belonging. In Kate's instance, several generations of her family were searching for connections or denying the connections that existed. The connections to Métis status were complicated by societal perceptions of financial benefits. Kate articulated these dilemmas:

I thought this might be a whole lot of tracing your family tree kind of stuff. So I was studying up the genealogy. When did he come from the Orkney Islands, and when did we start being who we are. As much as I love history, the details, the dates and stuff aren't important. Looking at the first recorded name of the woman he married and trying to decide if she was already a Métis then because of her last name. And my cousin, they were applying for status and she now has Métis status because they [ancestors] accepted scrip<sup>12</sup> at one point. So her dad, who still kind of denies all of it, has said that you can only be Métis if you're recognized by your community and he doesn't have a community, so he's not Métis. So she says, well I'm Métis and I recognize you, so you are. I'm not sure yet what I'll do. I just don't want to benefit, you know not personally, but financially.

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<sup>12</sup> Scrip refers to the distribution of land among Manitoba Métis in the 1870s. Scrip certificates were distributed to eligible Métis entitling them to a share of the land designated by the government for Métis ownership. Accepting scrip determined Métis rather than First Nation status.

**And so I was thinking, and what am I? Am I doing this from the outside?**

Kate's uncertainty about her status, her feeling that perhaps she was an imposter – an imposter Aboriginal, an imposter academic, an imposter in the classroom – are issues that frequently resurfaced during the research. Given her history and her struggles to come to terms with that past, it was not surprising. Yet, as a participant in this study, her experiences and feelings probably paralleled those of many other Aboriginal educators and many of the Aboriginal students hiding in English classrooms in Canadian high schools.

### **Shannon Reese's Story**

Shannon Reese taught English in a large parochial high school in a major Saskatchewan urban centre. Shannon, like many teachers, took a fairly direct path from high school to university, where she completed Bachelor's degrees in English and Education and a Master's degree in English, and then entered the teaching profession. Shannon was eager to participate in this research project in order to explore new ways of approaching her teaching:

**Shannon:** And just to let you know, I'm in this for growth. I'm in this for growth and feel really lucky ... Just hit me hard because I'm excited about it and I'm scared, but I want to learn, so...

**Geraldine:** You have an amazing reputation. A couple of people have said, "wow, you get to work with Shannon, are you ever lucky."

**Shannon:** Oh, I don't know. I respond to feedback, that's one thing I know about myself, so this is probably the first year in my whole career where I'm actually willing to go out on an edge with any Native stuff because I've just been too scared before.

Shannon described her school as a school in transition:

It's a large, Catholic high school and its logo is "A Tradition of Excellence." And when you walk into the cafeteria and turn left, you see the wall of honour. It has your Rhodes scholars, musicians, the works, the whole history of being elite in certain ways, and very competitive in athletics, academics, music programs, drama, but that self-image, the demographic of the school is changing. I went here as a student, and I've taught here for seven years. Historically it's been a white middle to upper middle class school. I can count the number of Aboriginals you see on one hand, but that's totally changing and we now have groups of visible minorities forming and increasing by the semester. There's a growing number of students who are Asian, a growing number of students who are Middle Eastern, and for the very first time, we have 6 or 7 students, I don't know what part of Africa they're from, but they're dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, and at this point they're together all the time. They haven't blended in any way with other races in the school. And this is the first time in seven years that I actually have a woman who has recently immigrated, and I don't know her well enough to know what part of Africa she's from, a Chinese student, a Peruvian, so we're becoming much more multicultural, but we're also no longer attracting students who are just from middle or upper middle class families. We have students who are coming with various financial means and the whole tradition of excellence motto and self image hasn't caught up with who we are now. The school's old beliefs about itself, I don't think are true any more. And so I feel like we're changing as our demographics change.

In her years as a student and a teacher in this school, Shannon could remember a handful of visibly Aboriginal students and had never had one in her classroom. As in many situations, there may have been other students who were of Aboriginal ancestry but chose not to disclose this information or who were unaware of their heritage. Shannon had deep roots in the community of this school and her understanding of the culture of the school was constantly challenged by her discomfort with the assumed privilege many students felt was rightfully theirs. As more students of visible minorities entered the school, the assumptions of the majority population were challenged, and Shannon felt that it was her responsibility, as a teacher of English, to continually challenge those assumptions and stereotypes. She had a strong sense of justice and an understanding of the white advantage that had positioned her in society.

Shannon approached all she did with energy and enthusiasm, and this project was no different. At our first meeting, over coffee in a small bistro, she quickly dispensed with small talk and moved on to the big picture. Shannon leapt into the heart of things and then stepped back to look at the bigger picture. Shannon cared deeply about those around her and was concerned with making the world a better place and exposing the inequities of the current systems. Her academic experiences had introduced her to postcolonial theory, and she very much tried to teach in a postcolonial way. As a teacher in a solidly middle class, predominantly white, Catholic high school, this approach often brought her up against some harsh critics.

Shannon jumped into every interview, seemingly in mid-thought. In our first formal interview, scripted questions were tossed aside as ideas began to flow even before I was able to turn on the recorder. Shannon's passion and her concern for students, for decolonizing, and for justice became evident with her opening statements:

It really jumped out at me because I don't know if I'm doing it or not, and that's that business of trying to teach in a postcolonial way but in the process re-victimizing, re-ostracizing, or making, quote unquote, Other...

Like, I have this Chinese student and I had two students perform prose poems by Fred Wah as monologues, and after class she was weeping, and she said that he just hit it on the mark. And she said, "It's good that you're doing this." In the conversation that we had with the students after the monologue, they suggested that racism really isn't a problem for them. Maybe it was a problem for their parents or grandparents, but they sort of feel that they're beyond it, yet the Chinese student is sitting there and she has recent memories of peers using racial slurs against her. There is such a discrepancy between the way they view themselves and what she's experienced.

Shannon was acutely aware of the experiences of her students, and one of her main goals was to use literature and language to empower them. She wanted her majority students to

understand their role in perpetuating stereotypes and racism, and she wanted her minority students to have voice. She wanted all her students to be empowered by their understandings and to make changes in their perceptions and the way they live in the world. Shannon told me of a teachable moment in her class:

We deal with this business of language and black and white because in the prose poems Fred Wah quotes what you get when you look up yellow, like yellow people, in the dictionary and it's just awful. All these negative connotations, and he saw those in film as well, so we took on this business of language and how racism is actually built into our definitions of things in the language. And so I show them a clip from *Malcolm X* where he's in prison and it's before he converts to Islam and his guru mentor takes him to the dictionary and they look up black in the dictionary and then they look up white. And it's unbelievable how we go from a physics kind of definition to qualities of character to racial groups. I stopped the tape at that point and said, "how old do you think the dictionary is that they're looking at," and they said, "oh, probably 1800s," and I said, "well, what do you think we'd find if we opened my dictionary here?" and we opened it up and it was the same, and you should have seen the class; they were upset at this notion. I haven't worked this hard as a teacher in a fifteen minute spot because it produced cognitive dissonance within them; they didn't want to admit that their language actually influenced their perceptions and that those things couldn't be separated and that they'd become part of our unconscious.

Because of the kinds of activities Shannon was already engaged in, she was well positioned to take part in this study. Before beginning this study, she had not taught a great deal of Aboriginal literature, but was interested in adding it to her repertoire. Although she attempted to teach through the postcolonial lens, she still struggled with how to do this. Shannon was a teacher who continually sought new knowledge and worked hard to improve her craft. She frequently used the metaphor of a toolbox to describe her teaching and her interpretive strategies. As the research progressed, Shannon continued to add tools to her box. She also recognized the tools her students brought to the classroom and realized that acquisition of those tools was very much tied

to experiences. She described two of her students who were effectively using interpretive tools with which the other students were still struggling:

And this Chinese student, she's been in Canada three years, and she has a greater command of conventions of formal writing than any other student in the class. After the Fred Wah monologues, she wrote me a piece that night called "I am Pretty." It's amazing, talking about what her aunt told her the day she arrived in Canada. She would have to fight for her place and how she really struggled with feeling that she's ugly and wishing that she was white. None of the other students have a clue. You know when we read Fred Wah they say, "Oh why doesn't he just buck up. He has a bad attitude." They like to isolate the person. Rather than it being a societal phenomenon, it's just a person with a bad attitude. He could make the best of things if he wanted to. And then you've got her with this counter voice, and I just think it's amazing.

And I talked to the girl who reads gender today, for at least an hour after school, because she needs coaching with her writing, and I said how do you get this gender stuff, and she said "because my dad grew up on a farm and when my mom goes away for a week, my two brothers sit in front of the TV and he tells me to make supper. You know, he brings the way he was raised right in there and that's why. And when he goes to do stuff outside, my brothers are too lazy to even help him and I end up doing that work too." So she's experienced it. So she gets it.

So I've got one grade 10 student who reads gender and this Chinese girl, she reads race. And that whole colonizer-colonizing thing, she reads it, she sees it. And it's such a powerful asset that she has. I didn't see it. I had to study for at least a couple years of university before I even started to get it. I don't get that at home, I don't get that at the work place. I work with a guy who says prove to me that someone from Africa can write a play as complex and universal as Shakespeare and then I'll teach it. His whole world literature class is British literature. If I didn't get anti-racist education classes at university, I wouldn't have gotten it at all. But this girl has it right off the bat.

Shannon's suitability for this research was also apparent through her understanding of power: the power of language and the power of institutions. In her grade 12 English class, discussions of power were common, and she encouraged these discussions and enjoyed playing the devil's advocate as she pushed her students to question the institutional power structures. Her class of 32 students was comprised of 20 males and 12 females, and, as is often the case, the males were the vocal majority. The few students

of colour rarely expressed themselves in class. I asked Shannon to describe her philosophy of education, the attitudes and approaches she brought to her classroom. She stated:

My philosophy is to try and keep alive the philosophy we had as children but treat it more as an obligation to engage with our world with as much intelligence and compassion and knowledge as we possibly can. And language, I believe, is the most powerful tool that any human being uses, so let's try and use it consciously and subject it to ourselves and other people.

Although Shannon tried to challenge the existing power structures and encouraged her students to do so, she was herself trapped in the institutional structure. Shannon had chosen to teach half-time while her children were preschoolers, and as a result, shared a classroom with another teacher. Glancing around the classroom, it was obvious that the choice of décor was not Shannon's. The walls were hung with sporting posters with a few Shakespearean posters thrown in for good measure. The podium was painted with the logo of a professional sports team, records of their league titles listed on the sides.

Shannon commented:

I teach in the most masculine of classrooms and I'm not allowed to move anything. I can't create my environment at all because I'm half-time and at home with my kids, and I'm not going to have my own classroom for years because I turned down my full time contract so I can stay at home and have fun with my kids. So that places a limit, I can't control my furniture as much, can't control the environment.

Nothing in the room reflected Shannon's taste or philosophy. In many ways, the room underscored her lack of power in the system, and although Shannon challenged her students to question the power structures, they also challenged her power. This led to some difficulties and anxieties in the classroom:

And I find it really sad when students put up walls to that [new experiences] or are habitually disrespectful. And it scares me to have a disrespectful group. Because I don't know how you teach,



obviously beyond being respectful, I don't know how you teach a person if they don't understand the importance of that. I figure, they've had seventeen years to learn that respect is not important, what am I going to do, except try and limit the damage they cause.

Shannon's experience the previous semester had been difficult because of this disrespect, and she struggled to bring her vision of a classroom and her teaching philosophy into this space. She felt her students did not know how to handle the freedoms she gave them:

I guess another thing to say about philosophy is that they've had so little experience with power in the classroom since the teacher is powerful and makes the executive decisions and ultimately they have to plead and so on, and a lot of dynamics have to do with the teacher's power and so on. And I'm really not there. And I'm not about that. I want my students to experience the power. So just like I said to my students today, "I don't want to teach the class a novel and have five of you say, yeah we're reading this novel in English class and gee is it ever boring." I refuse to do that because as I said "it's not about my learning, it's about your learning." So I said, "I'm going to put forward some options for you today, and if you don't like them, you come to me tomorrow with something better, and I'll entertain it." And they were just nodding their heads, like this sounded pretty good to them. And I think their experience, almost across the board, is here's the work, you do it, you write the exam. They have never had the control to direct their own learning, so I'm trying more and more to focus on empowering them.

Shannon firmly believed that her role as a teacher was to empower students to make meaning of literature. This was a difficult role when many students, Shannon reported, viewed the teacher as expert and were afraid to trust their own interpretive abilities and those of their peers:

They haven't learned yet that the things that come out of their peers' mouths matter. You don't get to write down things that come out of my mouth. So when you go to the exam, I'm considering the things that happened in discussion as part of the content of our course, part of our shared knowledge and I'm marking on that basis and they don't get it. They really believe that unless the teacher sanctified it, it's not true.

Shannon's insistence that the students take responsibility for their own learning often created difficulties for her and her students. As they shifted from the conventional way

they had been taught English to Shannon's classroom, they were uncertain how to proceed; the rules had changed and they did not have the new rulebook. Shannon was aware of this discomfort:

But you know, they've been disenfranchised. Unless someone put the check mark beside it, they're not sure it's good enough. So when you give them back answers and then they say what does such and such mean and you say, well there's lots of possibilities, which one do you see? Rather than seeing that as liberating at the beginning, they don't like that. They want certainty. And I had some of them regard my refusal to state the bottom line almost as incompetence on my part. But it's a deliberate choice. The way I think about it is if I can't inductively lead them to an insight, don't say it, because my job isn't to tell them what something means; my job is not to tell, it's to show. If I can't through inductive questioning show and have them articulate something and most likely have them articulate something that I haven't considered and that goes beyond what I thought, well then, try again tomorrow.

As Shannon introduced each new group of students to her methodology, she was met with resistance and frustration; the students, in her mind, wanted this English class to be very similar to all other English classes. They were not prepared for the difference and found the level of thinking Shannon demanded difficult. Grade 12 students were frequently fixated on marks as they prepared to enter university and college and felt disarmed by the changed expectations. For the first time, not only were they encouraged to ask the questions many of them had been thinking, but they now had a teacher who challenged the system and encouraged them not to be conformist. Shannon viewed these students as young adults, ready to enter the world and make their own decisions:

And you know rules too about you're not allowed to get a drink and you're not allowed to go to the bathroom. I find it absurd to have a seventeen year old ask me if he can go to the bathroom. I have trouble with that. I can think of people who are militant about that, to the point of humiliating females in distress. I mean, you're seventeen, you tell me, "Do you have to go to the bathroom? OK, then go to the bathroom." If they seem to have to go to the bathroom at 2:10 everyday, then I know they're up to something. Creating such dependencies, you know, and I'm at

home in the morning with a three year old and one year old who I sometimes see more spontaneity and creativity and intelligence from than I do with these people, these seventeen year olds sitting in front of me and I think "What have we done as educators? What have we accomplished having these docile bodies? What are we doing?"

Questions such as these pushed Shannon to teach in ways that liberated and decolonized.

Shannon's desire to bring justice and equity to the world pushed her to seek knowledge and engage in new experiences. Shannon told me of one such experience:

I took a class on Issues of Urban Aboriginals in Sociology. And the first assignment was to read Peggy Macintosh's essay on white privilege. And I had to write a paper on the unearned advantages and disadvantages of our race. And I just about dropped the class. Really, because I didn't think I could write it. And when I wrote it, that became such an important assignment for me because I really do understand now, why I am in the position I'm in, why I even have the jobs that I do. It has a lot to do with the family that I was born into. You know, things that appear to be achievements on my part have a lot to do with the culture I was raised in, the support I have and the immunities I have to certain kinds of problems and violence.

Shannon's initial reluctance to face the privileges of her position was mirrored in her students. Although she wanted them to see the economic, social, and educational privileges they took for granted, they were not ready and willing to confront them. They were happy with their privileges and viewed them as rights earned through the hard labour of their parents and grandparents.

Shannon's understanding of her place of privilege was only one of the strengths she brought to this research. Her studies in English had given her broad underpinnings of the interpretive strategies needed to understand literature. The goal of this research project was to examine the experiences of secondary English teachers who introduced

contemporary critical literary theory to their classrooms. In many ways, Shannon was already doing that, as the following observation illustrates:

Well, the thing is that I don't overtly teach interpretive strategies. I try and use the strategies that the text demands. But because of who I am and because of the thematic concerns and skill objectives of the curriculum, I pick certain texts, so, well, for example, we're going to be coming up to [Métis writer Maria Campbell's] "Jacob" and I'm going to be using a number of strategies to deal with that. So it depends what the text asks for. I probably use three or four in conjunction at a time. And because it's a Canadian literature course, I've selected things that call attention to class, to gender, to nationality. And we talk about that. What is emerging in the themes right now is self-definition. Under what circumstances is self-definition possible? And how does it manifest itself in the text?

Although Shannon was aware of the interpretive strategies that she used and wanted her students to use a variety of strategies, she was not yet ready to name those strategies as she introduced them to the students. She preferred to let the text speak for itself:

I'm not at the point where I'd want to say let's take this text and do a feminist reading of it, and then let's do a reader-response reading. I'm not convinced that my students are ready for that or that they need that. I figure if I can make them aware that these things are operating in a text and that they're always operating, that they're always taking into account the position from which the writer creates this art, and it includes all these things all the time.

Shannon also realized that although English may be her passion, it was not necessarily the passion of her students, and that her grade 12 classroom may be their last conscious experience with literary interpretation. For this reason she also connected criticism to the various media that students would need to interpret after they left secondary school:

I try and really expand their notion of text to say that every form of art, every message that human beings create is constructed for its intended audience. Why is it built the way it is? What's the power relationship between the person who creates it and the person who sees it?

So I try and expand that notion of text because they're not going to write a literary analysis after they leave me but they're still

going to need to do close multiple readings of something, and think, you know, what are the factors around this? I guess I do look at how is this thing built, what are the pieces? I do do that still, if you call that formalist, but with an eye to how is this reflecting the way this society has arranged itself and what powers does this person have to tell their own story?

Shannon was enthusiastically looking forward to participating in this research. She wanted to learn, she wanted her comfort zone to be rocked, she wanted her students to be challenged. Working with Shannon was a bit like riding a roller coaster in the dark: I never knew what would be around the corner, but I knew it would be exciting.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **THE SECOND LAYER**

#### **In Conversation: I**

##### **Introduction**

Although the research was carried out in two independent research sites with each participant determining the shape of the research in her own classroom, the two participants met twice and shared their ideas, once at the beginning of the project and once at the end of the school year. This conversation enabled them to share their ideas and experiences while contemplating how the research would unfold. Because I chose participatory action research as my central methodology, I believed that the participants needed to have some say in shaping the research. Also, because the research was funded through the McDowell Foundation and one of the intents of the foundation is to improve classroom practice, it was important to begin creating a community for possible further dissemination of the results. The involvement of two teachers who were able to interact with each other created the possibility of further conversations. Kate and Shannon were able to share ideas with each other and enlist each other's support, should they so choose, in presenting these ideas to their colleagues.

As indicated earlier, the initial conversation began over lunch and continued through most of the afternoon around a kitchen table. Kate and Shannon met each other for the first time over lunch. Each had met with me on two previous occasions and had read my literature review which provided a starting point for the conversation. Ideas and concerns, questions and answers, laughter and frustration filled the hours. Both Kate and Shannon had many stories to tell and many hopes for their students and their teaching. During this initial conversation, several issues emerged that would be further developed during the course of the project. The use of a conversational interview facilitated the exploration of a range of ideas, ideas that may not have emerged had a more formal interview format been used. However, a free-ranging conversation added a level of complexity to the data analysis as one idea segued into another and another, often returning to the initial idea much later in the conversation. The links between ideas were not always obvious, forcing me to carefully read and reread the data to identify the central issues.

I was able to classify the strands that emerged as three major issues. I chose to organize the data based on these major issues and the strands that comprised each issue. Organizing the data and analysis in this way provided the best opportunity to respond to my initial research objectives.

The three broad issues that emerged centred on the personal, the student, and the theoretical. I began with the personal issues because Kate's and Shannon's perceptions of themselves as individuals and teachers were central to the research project. Their identity and their understanding of their identity shaped their relationships with me, with

each other, and with their students. Identity as an Aboriginal woman was a primary concern for Kate while identity as a teacher was central to Shannon's understanding of herself. The second strand in this issue focused on their perceptions of Aboriginal peoples. Because the research study looked at ways to integrate Aboriginal literature into the classroom, it was important to consider their preconceptions of Aboriginal peoples and issues.

The second issue was focused on students. The "baggage" the students brought with them to the classrooms, in large part, determined the end result of the research. Shannon's and Kate's concerns about their students' readiness and need to be in this project fell into three categories. First, they identified the students' views of racism and equity. Understanding the students' views of racism and equity was closely tied to the second strand, the students' perceptions of Aboriginals. Because a goal of this research project was to determine if the theoretical lenses of postcolonialism and Aboriginal criticism provided a more respectful way of analyzing Aboriginal literature, having an understanding of students' perceptions was imperative. The final strand in this issue examined the students' perception of English as a discipline. Through participation in this study, the students were challenged to learn to read in different ways and to develop an understanding of literary theory.

The final issue relates to the understanding of theory and the issues that arose for teachers and students alike. Because this research study looked at literary critical theories as interpretive lenses and used Aboriginal literature as the medium for interpretation, theoretical issues formed a significant portion of the data. The strands identified under



this issue link closely to the format of the literature review. This situation may be the result of the participants being given a copy of the literature review which then formed the basis of our initial discussions. It is also possible that I saw the issues emerge in light of my previous organization of material. Canonicity, literary criticism, postcolonial theory, Aboriginal critical theory, and resistance literature are the strands in the final issue.

### **Personal Issues**

Although both Shannon and Kate were eager to participate in the research, each of them had personal reservations about her inadequacies. Kate was concerned that perhaps she was not “Aboriginal enough” and Shannon worried about capturing every teachable moment. Both of these reservations affected the outcome of the research at the individual sites. The life histories of the teacher-participants cannot be separated from this research story. Goodson (1992) asserts that “In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is” (p. 4). Over the time that I worked with Shannon and Kate, I saw how their personal lives intersected with their professional lives. Although all of us have life stories, to consider when these stories become histories and why they are important in the context of educational research is important.

One of the goals of this research project was to consider whether or not teaching literature through the lenses of literary theory might be an appropriate approach for the secondary classroom. Traditionally, educational research was conducted by academics

for academics and was often critical of teachers, frequently inaccessible to teachers, and usually offered little that they could translate into classroom practice. A major goal of this research study was “to produce teacher-centred, professional knowledge [and] to develop a modality of educational research which speaks both within and to the teacher” (Goodson, 1992, p. 15). By connecting the research to the life histories of the teachers, I hope that the project will have more meaning for the participants and those who read the story.

### **Identity**

Kate’s primary concern was her identity as an Aboriginal woman. Because she had been raised in a white middle class environment, she did not have the community connections that many would expect of a Métis woman. Although Kate struggled with her place in the Aboriginal community, she was able to identify with the Aboriginal student population and was empathetic to their stories. She also struggled with the shifting divisions in the school as more and more visibly Aboriginal students self-selected the alternative program and the regular program became, in Kate’s words “whiter”. As a non-visible Aboriginal,<sup>13</sup> she wondered where she fitted in the school community with its racial and physical segregation:

I think I'd rather be teaching the alternative program. In terms of this stuff, I think I interact better with those kids, maybe I do, I don't know. One of the kids I feel closest to found both his mother, and his aunt, and his sister had hung themselves at separate times, and he's still coming to see me everyday at school, and somehow he's going to make it through

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<sup>13</sup> The term non-visible Aboriginal emerged to describe those individuals of Aboriginal heritage who did not appear Aboriginal and were therefore able to blend into the majority population.

school and I'd rather be with him than my white hockey players,  
but...

This struggle with identity and determining a location of belonging was an issue that frequently resurfaced in Kate's world. As previously reported, she felt less free to self-declare her ancestry and tell her story as her classroom demographics changed. She was concerned that students would feel that her teaching of Aboriginal literature was a personal bandwagon, not an adherence to the curriculum. She felt this concern was validated when other teachers chose not to use Aboriginal literature in their English classes.

Although Kate's concern was tied to her cultural identity, Shannon's concern was connected to her identity as a teacher. Although Shannon had more experience as a secondary teacher, her entire secondary school life as student and teacher had been spent in the same school. In contrast, Kate had taught in a variety of situations, at the university, overseas, and in community colleges. Shannon required frequent reassurance that I would not feel the need to take over her classroom:

**Shannon:** My fear, you know my biggest fear about this? That you're going to be sitting there watching me and you're just going to wish that you could tell me to take a seat.

**Geraldine:** No. I won't do that.

**Shannon:** No, but my fear is that you're really going to want to and that you're going to see me missing all these moments. This class provides them and you're going to see me missing them and my blind spots are going to be, like, just flashing red lights. That's my fear.

Ultimately, Shannon's concern with my perceptions of her as a teacher reshaped the research project in her classroom. Although I was a frequent visitor in Kate's classroom over the course of the semester, my visits to Shannon's classroom were infrequent, once

near the beginning of the project and again near the end when we team-taught a section on Inuit literature. As a result, the data collected from the two research sites varied considerably, offering different insights into the practices of the two teachers.

### **Perceptions of Aboriginals**

Kate and Shannon brought very different experiences to the project. One area of difference was their interaction with and exposure to Aboriginal peoples. Kate was Métis, had grown up in a community that had a large Aboriginal population, and taught in a school with a significant Aboriginal student body, whereas Shannon was raised in a city where the Aboriginal population was predominantly segregated in pockets inaccessible to her. Although the city's Aboriginal population had increased over the last years, the segregation had become more pronounced. These differing experiences and contacts with Aboriginals led to differing perceptions, as illustrated in this conversation:

**Shannon:** You know what's funny though, something that I don't hear people talk about and I think is there and I feel it? I think part of us, and when I say us I mean mainstream people of European descent... I'm scared of the power that native people have, because any culture that could survive what they've been subjected to and be... I get this feeling of a gathering of energy, and I actually take extra pains to show respect because there's a power there that's slightly fearsome to me. Do you know what I'm saying? Does that resonate at all with you?

**Kate:** If we don't all kill ourselves first, like I mean there may be that, but in pretty large parts huge despair and desolation as well, you know.

**Shannon:** I feel powerless. It's scary to me, really scary to meet people from a culture that carries so much pain. It's really hard. Cause I do feel, I do feel ashamed because I am aware of it, about as aware as I can handle at this point in my life. I feel ashamed.

Although Shannon felt this sense of Aboriginal power, a power that she feared, I believe this fear was connected to her place of privilege as a white middle-class woman. Although she understood the necessity of shifting the current power imbalance, she was not certain of her own position in this new paradigm:

And yet sometimes I feel mad. Like why do I have to give up, even inviting an elder into a classroom, the kind of discomfort I have to manage in inviting, and approaching, and using rituals in the proper way, I mean I feel like, god, I might as well be on the moon, so off my ground, so afraid that I'll inadvertently betray huge blind spots, or inadvertently offend. And then I reach a fatigue with that, and I'll say, "hey wait a minute, why can't I just call you up and say come at 3:25. And why can't I just call you up and say exactly what I want you to talk about?" You know what I mean? So why can't we meet half way sort of thing? Yet I understand in a grander perspective why that's exactly where we need to be right now. Too bad we didn't get there a long time ago. But I'm not used to that and I'm not in a staff that models it.

Shannon recognized the need for change and, for that reason, looked at ways of teaching in a postcolonial manner and entered into this research study. At the same time, she dealt with the everyday reality of her school environment where change was not seen as necessary and, in fact, was viewed as a threat.

This perception of change played into the implementation of the most recent secondary English Language Arts curriculum published by Saskatchewan Learning (1999) that included Aboriginal literature in the course of study. Shannon played devil's advocate by asking the question that many of her peers and students echoed:

**Shannon:** OK, I'm going to ask an ignorant question. Here's an ignorant question and I'm going to ask it in an ignorant way. Why all this razzmatazz about First Nations people and lit? If they're not in my classroom and if I've got a multicultural representation within my classroom with stories that are equally rich and equally unexplored by the mainstream in our culture.

Because my students have said to me before, enough with the native stuff, we get it, so why? I'm getting my directives from on high.

**Geraldine:** For me personally I think it's one of those things we get with our heads but we don't get it with our hearts.

**Shannon:** Why is it more important to get it with your heart about First Nations than it is about Chinese people or about...

**Geraldine:** I don't know that it is necessarily more important but, I think in looking at Aboriginal lit we have to come to terms with who we are as Canadians and that whole idea of settler invaders, settler colonists, that we don't confront. We don't see our complicity in having deprived a group of people of their land. That's part of our sense of entitlement. Obviously we thought that we were technologically more advanced and we had a right to anything that we could run over. So I think that that's a big part of it. I also think that that's the one area where our whole perception of a pluralistic multicultural society has not dealt with the prejudices of our mainstream.

Although both Shannon and Kate were ready to begin the process of decolonizing their classrooms and developing approaches to teaching that would facilitate that process, they were unsure of the response the students would have and began to identify some of the issues that they thought would arise.

### **Student Issues**

Although the research dealt specifically with the experiences of two classroom teachers, it was impossible to separate those experiences from those of the students in their classrooms. Ultimately, teaching is about and for the students. Kate and Shannon knew their school communities intimately, having been both students and teachers in these institutions. In our initial conversation, Shannon and Kate discussed their classroom communities and their experiences with those students. Through this conversation, they

were able to identify concerns that they felt might be stumbling blocks to the success of the research and reasons why the research was so important. Both teachers hoped that participation in this project would bring about change in the attitudes and perceptions of their students.

### **Students' views of racism and equity**

Both Kate and Shannon were very concerned with their students' perceived inability to recognize their own racist and sexist behaviors or to identify the assumptions that perpetuated their stereotypes. Although Shannon's students were convinced that they were not racist, students of colour experienced discrimination; Kate's students recognized that some of their own attitudes might be perceived as racist but they were convinced that they had justifiable cause to hold these attitudes. Shannon and Kate both noted that although their students were capable of articulating appropriate responses, they no longer saw sexism and racism as problematic issues:

**Shannon:** They assume with gender and race that the tables are equal.

**Kate:** It's done; it was done in the 60s.

**Shannon:** It was my parents' problem and my grandparents' problem, but it is done. The closest I've had to a student acknowledging it is a student named Jose and he's Chilean, "The work is done and it's a tired old song and I'm tired of hearing it." And it's not done yet, because it's done in here (indicates head) but it's not done in here (indicates heart) and they'll have these emotional reactions.

Both Kate and Shannon saw the introduction of Aboriginal literature and appropriate tools for its interpretation as a catalyst for conversations about societal prejudices and stereotypes. Although they understood the difficulty in changing ingrained attitudes, both were discouraged by the slow pace of change and wondered how students could be

so seemingly oblivious to their racist attitudes. Himani Bannerji (1987) explains why students may have a difficult time identifying their own racist attitudes:

Racism becomes an everyday life and normal way of seeing. Its banality and invisibility is such that it is quite likely that there may be entirely politically correct white individuals who have a deeply racist perception of the world. It is entirely possible to be critical of racism at the level of ideology, politics and institutions... yet possess a great deal of common sense racism. (p. 11)

In an attempt to counteract “common sense racism,” Shannon had begun to work with her students on language and the idea that the words people choose frequently support their unquestioned views of society. By using that language uncritically, they begin to internalize the values it represents. Although her students initially resisted this idea, when shown a video clip of *Malcolm X* (1992), they began to recognize negative and positive associations inherent in specific word choices:

**Shannon:** The other day I was sharing some of the little gems from their found poems on Fred Wah and it’s so cool the way the kids pick words from different places and combine them. Two of them actually pieced together words to make “the Canadian morning that is still night” and that was their way of expressing that the ideal of the mosaic is not yet realized because these are the things that are in the way. And so I was interpreting for the class “the Canadian morning that is still night,” and I was relating morning to light with the positive aspect of the ideal and night and darkness with the negative one, and Jose says, “Did you notice how you lumped racism in there with darkness?” And I said to the class, “why did I do that?” And they answered, “a deep part of you has already been subjected.”

Yeah, like I said to them, your language is the lens through which you see the world. This is your language, start dealing with it, start noticing yourself doing it.

Although Shannon’s students were beginning to see the ingrained nature of prejudicial attitudes reflected in language, they were not yet ready to admit that it affected their



beliefs and attitudes. Both Shannon and Kate hoped that increased awareness would begin to change attitudes.

### **Students' views of Aboriginals**

Although Shannon's students had little direct exposure to Aboriginals in the community, contact with members of the First Nations and Métis community was a daily occurrence in the lives of Kate's students. Each class had developed its own ways of responding to the Aboriginal presence in their community and each group's coping mechanisms reflected their prejudices. Shannon's class could pretend that Aboriginals were not a part of their community; Kate's class found other ways to separate themselves.

**Kate:** Ours totally can walk past the lounge and look right into that presence (Aboriginal student population).

**Shannon:** You know, Natives at my school are treated like they're totally invisible. If they're visibly Native, they're invisible. If they're not visibly Native, they've got social leverage.

**Kate:** And now that segregation seems to be happening, [you] don't very often see one kid alone, right; they'll be with their buddies.

**Shannon:** So they don't necessarily want to be making friends with groups of mixed race.

**Kate:** No, they don't want to. There is one kid who has a locker by my classroom who has white friends. Like I can just count the few who hang out...

We don't have an alternative program in grade 9, so my grade 9 class is different. There're a few kids in there who are Aboriginal. But they're not exactly mixing in the same way as the kids who came from the white schools.

In both schools, white students inherited ways to separate themselves from the Aboriginal community. Shannon's students were separated by geography while Kate's school had undeclared zones that everyone knew about; very few students crossed those boundaries and teachers and administration did little to change the arrangement.

Both Kate and Shannon were able to identify some of the reasons that the separation between groups existed, and when pressed, students would justify their perceptions and the reasons for their prejudices. The students' understanding of treaties and government involvement in Aboriginal issues directly impacted their perceptions of Aboriginal people:

**Shannon:** It's funny though because a lot of kids perceive empowerment in terms of cash, and my students often say, well, what's it going to take? Canadians seen down on bended knee, right, but they don't know how to unpack that, and they have a lot of misinformation in their minds. Like no Aboriginal people pay taxes. And I did, I asked my students, "you know the statistics about how our province is changing, what's it going to look like in 50 years? You know, what do you see?" And you know what they responded with? That we are going to be footing the welfare bill and the conundrum that they can't solve is that the government has been throwing everything in terms of programs and materials that they can to help enable people and it hasn't resulted in tangible change. And they're frustrated with that; they're really frustrated. They either want to see something work or they want Native people to just get on with it. You know this whole argument: "well, that's what other immigrants do."

**Kate:** That's what their parents are saying to them.

**Shannon:** Right, right. I mean, if it were a matter of simply getting on with it, it would have happened a long time ago. But they do compare with other minority groups, and they're frustrated and they're tired, I think, of not being able to see progress or make headway with some of the riddles and the problems. So I'm conscious of that when I'm teaching them. What I do with it has to be strategic because they can exhaust quickly.

Although the attitudes of the students were regrettable, they were not significantly different from what I had expected to find. It was my hope that through the research,

students would be able to use literature to learn about diverse cultures and to enter imaginatively into the lives of others and to develop an understanding of human experiences. By introducing the students to multicultural literature and, specifically Aboriginal literature, I also had hoped that students from marginalized and minority cultures would be able to find voice as other marginalized stories were heard. Kate's experience the previous semester with Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* indicated the possibilities for this approach. Kate had found that by reading and discussing the book, her students developed an understanding of the issues confronting the Métis community and Maria Campbell's family. She was, however, concerned that they had historicized the events and were unable to make connections between historical and contemporary incidents. Both Kate and Shannon were hopeful that introducing a different approach to the teaching of Aboriginal literature would enable the students to make the head and heart connections.

### **Students' views of English**

Kate and Shannon also had some concerns with their students' preparedness to approach literature in a way that might differ from their past experiences in English classes. Both women felt that the students came into their classes with preconceptions of how the course should be taught based on their experiences in other classes. Often the approaches Shannon and Kate took differed from the perceived norm and caused the students to feel unsettled, not knowing what to expect, and wanting things to return to normal. These perceptions of the way English should be taught underscored a concern of both teachers – many teachers were not making the changes advocated by the new curriculum but adhering to the way they had always taught. This resistance to change prevented the

students from participating fully in Shannon's class. She felt as if she needed to reassure them that they were going to gain the skills necessary to complete grade 12 English and that she was indeed a competent teacher. Their questioning of her abilities may have added to her feelings of insecurity:

As far as student comfort as well, since day one my students, they really do want a genre approach, man. They're used to getting it elsewhere. In my school there is very little change it seems. They're not used to a thesis driven thing, you know, or even a skill driven thing. They want their novels, they want to know that, they're comfortable in one place, for six weeks, we know how she's going to act and then we know how we're going to act.

The challenges facing Shannon and Kate reinforced my concerns about the complexity of teaching English at the high school. Were the students ready to look at literature through critical theory when so many of the basic building blocks seemed to be missing? The challenges of building understanding sometimes seemed insurmountable, yet English teachers face this task daily, with enthusiasm and with success.

### **Theoretical Issues**

Because this research program involved the study of literature through the lenses of critical literary theory, we needed to examine our understandings of the discipline and how these influenced our philosophies of teaching. In our conversations, we considered a variety of issues that grew out of Kate's and Shannon's thoughts after reading the literature review.

### **Canonicity**

The introduction of Aboriginal literature challenged the preconceived notions of what was good literature that the educational system reinforced. Although the Saskatchewan

English Language Arts curriculum mandated the study of a diversity of literature and devoted one semester to Canadian literature and another semester to world literature, teachers' acceptance of these changes did not come easily. The high school canon was still an important entity, reinforced by the books found on the shelves of the book rooms and the choices teachers made in selecting texts for their classrooms. Shannon and Kate had often found themselves at odds with the other members of their departments, defending their choices:

**Shannon:** And it's interesting to see how the Canadian lit and the World lit are not what they're meant to be yet. I know of some teachers who are making them what they're meant to be. There's one teacher at our school who's amazing and she does most of her work solo. She's doing really neat postcolonial work, but a problem with the advanced placement program that our school's a part of is that teachers who then teach the B30 teach predominantly British and American because the AP exam still has that. And it will say that you can choose another text that's not on the list if it's of comparable literary merit. But then it becomes a justification for sticking to British and American. And then the students aren't getting an experience of world literature.

**Kate:** That was my reaction when I read this. Well, of course, that's what B30 is, I mean we do our little, so we can say yes we did a little bit of *Canterbury Tales*, and you know whatever at the beginning, and then we do *Hamlet*, but then the whole thing gets at what the B30 curriculum actually is. So when I read this, I said of course we're teaching, no we don't just teach British and American stuff, but obviously...

**Shannon:** No, I had my colleague, senior English teacher say to me, you show me a play from Africa that has the integrity of a Shakespearean play and then we'll talk.

**Kate:** And when did it become either/or? Can't we do that and still... We got in our *April Raintrees* and our librarian said, "they're still flogging that?" I don't think I said anything.

**Shannon:** You don't say that about Shakespeare do you, still flogging that stuff.

Although Shannon and Kate embraced the new curriculum and enjoyed teaching a diversity of literature, they often felt that they had to justify their choices to colleagues and to their students. Shannon tried to point out the relevance of studying diverse Canadian voices as this example illustrates:

I heard some research on the number of untranslated, unpublished novels in Saskatchewan by people of Ukrainian descent. I have a number of Ukrainians in my classroom and they said, "What do you mean. There's this wealth of stories and we don't have access to them, why not?" And that really offended them.

By bringing the examples close to home, the students recognized the voices that were not being heard and began to question why these voices were silenced. Kate often asked her students to bring in writing from someone whose voice they had not heard and they were able to identify groups who had not been represented in the classroom. Identifying these unheard voices was the first step on the journey; learning to interpret these voices respectfully was the second.

### **Literary Criticism**

In my experience as a teacher of English literature, my students often asked how I knew what a particular work meant. In the minds of my students, it seemed as if I held a magic key to understanding, and they were denied access to that key. My studies of literature and my work with literary theory had given me not only one key, but an entire ring of keys. For the purpose of this research, I used the metaphor of a lens to describe the effect of bringing literary theory to literature to unlock the potential meanings of a text. Just as different glasses facilitate different views of surroundings, different interpretive lenses

facilitate different readings of a text. Teachers have frequently withheld this knowledge from their students, and, depending on the English classes they have taken at the university, this knowledge may have been withheld from them. Shannon and Kate had each experienced critical theory in their graduate classes but struggled to think of ways that they could introduce and use this theory with their grade 12 students.

Kate began the conversation with a series of questions concerning the use of theory:

**Kate:** I know they don't have to reproduce the theory, but do you want, how explicit do you want them to be here?

**Geraldine:** Yeah, I guess part of where I got my idea from was an article by Lisa Schade, "Demystifying Literary Criticism in the High School Classroom," and when she writes about her high school classroom there, she talks about teaching the students the literary theory.

**Kate:** The labels.

**Geraldine:** Yeah, they had the labels, they had the literary perspectives so that by the end of the year when her students come to class to talk about a book or a short story or anything, then somebody will say, well you know if you look at it from a Marxist lens, this is what's happening, or if you look at it from a feminist lens... So I'd like to see if students can say, "But you know if I look at it with this lens, this is what I see happening, but what happens if I put on this different pair of glasses? What if I look at it from this perspective?" So do they need to be able to name the theory and to what extent? I guess in part they do; they need to know what things they are looking for.

My original intention was to have Kate and Shannon introduce the students to the critical lenses and focus on the postcolonial and Aboriginal critical lenses; however, they raised some interesting questions about the narrowness of this focus:

**Shannon:** And can you introduce those two without introducing all of them? Because I feel every time I teach something, I invoke the strategies that will be rewarded by the text, and it might include A, B, and F this time and mostly B this time. And it's a

different combo... I would rather present them with the waterfront... be able to refer to the other ones. I would value that.

**Kate:** I would too, but I have to remember mine are still trying to get what happens in this story...

**Geraldine:** I think that's it's good for people to know what interpretive strategies they're using, and I think that when we talk about that whole idea of using literature, the colonizing effect of literature, by not letting people know what the interpretive strategies are, we can use literature to colonize, because we're then making the sort of unstated claim that this is the correct interpretation.

As a result of this conversation, I prepared a glossary of literary theories for each of the teachers to use with her students (Appendix C). Within the context of this conversation, it was also interesting to note the differing perspectives Shannon and Kate had concerning their students abilities to apply theory to a text. Shannon indicated, with confidence, that she knowingly used theory to interpret texts and presented those interpretations to her students and that they in turn interpreted through theory, even if they were unaware of the theoretical lenses that they were using. Shannon wanted to present them with the "waterfront," which I interpreted to be a wide range of interpretive lenses, but she did not see the need for them to understand or name the theoretical perspectives of these lenses. She also seemed confident that her students would be able to use these lenses to interpret the texts. Kate, on the other hand, was not confident that her students had the necessary skills to use the lenses to see the texts in new ways. She felt that her students were still struggling to understand at a literal level and was concerned with their ability to use theoretical lenses at all.



Our conversation continued with a discussion of their experiences with critical theory. These experiences made them ideal candidates for the study because they had a working knowledge of theoretical approaches. Although both Shannon and Kate were introduced to critical theory in their university courses, Shannon's experience was different from Kate's, indicating a disciplinary difference between English and Sociology. Shannon identified her reticence to name the lenses with her own educational experiences while Kate indicated that naming was part of her disciplinary experience:

**Shannon:** I think it would be really useful for them to name it. Part of my hesitation is the way I was educated myself. Prior to my fifth year of university no one was naming this stuff.

**Kate:** I was in Marxist sociology so we were busy naming everything.

**Shannon:** This did not come out of the bottle for me until fifth year, which is why I'm slow.

**Geraldine:** Yeah, I think that they need to know that this is how we're interpreting it, that we're using theoretical approaches, that we didn't just come up with this out of the blue, that there's a long history and tradition and they've been using the lenses, they just haven't named them.

Naming the lenses, however, was an important part of this research study and developing an understanding of the theoretical approaches was a necessary element. Although we had decided to name and describe a range of theoretical lenses, we would focus on postcolonialism and Aboriginal critical theory.

### **Postcolonial Critical Theory**

Shannon, through her graduate work, had studied postcolonial literature and had a working knowledge of this theoretical lens. She required clarification of my use of the term:

**Shannon:** So when you use the word colonial are we talking, how do you define it because there's neo-colonial relations now, and how structured is your definition?

**Geraldine:** In terms of postcolonial lit and theory, I'm really looking at works authored in English in countries that are or used to be part of the Commonwealth. And because it's Canadian lit we fall into that totally.

Postcolonial theory was the starting point, a way of moving into Aboriginal theory by focusing on the colonizer and the colonized, and developing an understanding of this perspective. Literature and language as resistance were a tie between the two theoretical approaches. Although Shannon and Kate had some familiarity with the postcolonial lens, the Aboriginal lens was very new and unfamiliar.

### **Aboriginal Critical Theory**

Both Kate and Shannon felt as if they were walking on unknown ground as they attempted to develop an understanding of Aboriginal theory. Kate was able to see connections between the theorists and her classroom approaches. It was obvious that she had given a great deal of thought to this interpretive approach, and it resonated with her at several levels:

**Kate:** You know what happened when I was reading, I thought okay, it's new, it's not, as you say in here, uncharted waters, but then at one point when de Ramirez or whoever is talking about what the scholar should be or could be in the classroom according to the theory, I wrote down, oh, that's what I'm doing. And I hope I'm doing this stuff; maybe I'm not trying hard to be transformed. Maybe it's not such a big unknown or big leap; it's just that I want to make it explicit for them.

**Geraldine:** In a sense the Aboriginal theory is the newest of the theoretical approaches, so there's not as much out there. Postcolonialism has been around for a couple of decades now so people wrote it and people wrote

about it. Aboriginal theory is newer. Theory is always an evolutionary process, and people are playing with the ideas.

**Kate:** I don't understand necessarily the communitism of the pieces I'll be doing. I get the resistance, the conversive, that's what I was looking for, you know that's what I think I'm doing in the classroom, the conversive approach that this person talks about. When they talk about grounding it in the tribal, like understandings, I mean, I don't have that.

**Geraldine:** I think we've tried to do a lot of pan-Indian things, you know the medicine wheel can now apply to absolutely everything under the sun, and we have medicine wheels and dream catchers...

**Kate:** And the circle, as Marilyn Dumont says, that goddamn circle again.

Geraldine: Yeah, so I think what we've done is we've taken something that is kind of easy to see and easy to hang on to and then tried to make it fit everything... So I think that in terms of Aboriginal theory, I'm looking more at how does resistance work in this? How do these authors tell the stories of their people? What comment are they making on their society and our society? So that whole idea of activism and resistance, playing with the language...

**Kate:** And also to tell, this is the way this tradition sees the land. This is what these traditions mean to us.

Kate was beginning to look at how this theoretical approach connected to her classroom. Although she questioned her connection to the Aboriginal community, she clearly saw herself as part of that community as she considered the traditions described in the literature.

Kate was able to identify with the theoretical approach; Shannon recognized how a theory could grow out of literature. One of her English professors had drawn her attention to the ways an author teaches a reader to read a text. She was able to apply this understanding to her students' experience with Drew Hayden Taylor:

**Shannon:** Like in Paul Smith's critical methods class. He looked at *Gulliver's Travels* and just the way that starts. He said it's almost like teaching your new audience how to read a novel, giving them a handrail. So it's really obvious what you're doing, because you're creating your own ideal reader all the time. And my students, in the hands of Drew Hayden Taylor in "Pretty like a White Boy," were really starting to get it, so that they were like, "hey he's isolated Italian food and breast implants. Hey I know what he's doing, that's what we did, right?" They're starting to get that and so you think, well hey, Drew Hayden Taylor is training them. He has to shake them up and create that space you were talking about. And once he's done that and he knows they have been trained to think and read a little differently, and think of themselves a little differently, then maybe they'll be able to appreciate other stories.

Although neither Shannon nor Kate was confident about her understanding of Aboriginal critical theory, they had both begun to look at how it could be presented to their students and how they were, unknowingly, already using it. Both women saw the power of literature as a form of resistance and used this as the hook to pull themselves into the study and to help their students connect to the literature.

### **Resistance literature**

As Kate and Shannon thought about the literature that was available to them and that they had chosen to use in their classrooms, they realized that resistance played an important role in many of the works. As the writers became more adept at the written tradition, the forms of resistance became subtle and more difficult to recognize. The lens through which these works were read then became increasingly important:

**Geraldine:** I think that's part of that move, using literature as resistance until that literature has sort of carved out a space of its own. I think that the early literature of any resistance group is issues-based because we're going to get on our soapbox and go for broke. And then, the art form of literature becomes what drives the writer and the issues are there, but they're dealt with in a different way. Like I think as readers we have to

work harder to find them and the author almost becomes more subversive. I'm thinking of Thomas King right now, that the issues are still there, but...

**Shannon:** Like I remember first hearing "Magpies" and just thinking, Wow, that was a really neat story and very entertaining, and it wasn't till much later that I realized, hey, there's a real subtle... it's not subtle once you see it, but I didn't think of it as a clash of cultures story.

**Kate:** Or "Trapline." But I was thinking with this Joanne Thom essay, you can see the progression, like from Campbell with *Halfbreed* to *April Raintree* to Thomas King and so on. Not progression in the sense that it's better than, but movement...

**Shannon:** The problem too about divorcing the literature from the issues is that it's easy to view it as a romanticized thing separate from current reality, right. Like say, they're used to being thrown creation myths and stories from different cultures, and it's not this living thing that we're interacting with, it's a quaint thing, do you know what I'm saying?

**Geraldine:** And I think with a lot of Aboriginal lit, issues are still central. And I guess in every literature there's that range from what would seem to be a very simplistic, didactic kind of thing to a very complex... and maybe because there's less Aboriginal lit out there it's easier to see that. I'm guessing that 40 years ago when they first started saying that they had to have Can Lit courses at the university, somebody was sitting there and going, "Oh it's all so simplistic, and where's the good stuff?"

We left the kitchen table that day, enthusiastic and fearful. Each of us knew that the good stuff was out there, but each of us also knew that we would be met by resistance from colleagues and students. Kate and Shannon began to think about how they could work together with me in this research while maintaining the integrity of their classrooms. Moving from the comfort of the kitchen to the reality of the classroom was a big step. Ideas discussed with two other like-minded souls would prove to be very different from ideas presented to students who ranged in ability and interest and had developed their own forms of resistance to change.



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **THE THIRD LAYER**

#### **In Shannon's Classroom**

##### **Description**

My first visit to Shannon's classroom happened two days after our kitchen table conversation with Kate. Shannon was eager to begin and had the capacity to connect a range of themes and literature in her planning. She loved to engage with ideas and theory and imagine what could happen in her classroom. Over the next months, we exchanged frequent emails, often met for coffee, and continued to grapple with the difficulty of making literature and ideas come alive for her class of grade twelve students.

Shannon's classroom was an interesting picture of contrasts for the space was not really her own. As the mother of two young children, Shannon had chosen to teach half time and, as a result, she shared her space with another teacher; shared is perhaps a misnomer. Nothing in the classroom reflected Shannon. She had been relegated to one very small desk and a bookshelf. Everything else in the classroom reflected the other teacher, a man

with more seniority who taught English half time and spent the remainder of the day teaching Physical Education. The room was decorated with a few Shakespearean movie posters and a multitude of hockey posters supporting his favourite team. The desks were arranged in rows and a podium stood at the front of the room. This podium was painted with the logo of the favoured NHL team, and the dates of Stanley Cup victories were printed on the sides. This space frustrated Shannon, yet she felt powerless to change it. She had not put up any posters that reflected her interests; she did not move the desks out of rows, although she talked about it; and she spoke from behind the podium. Shannon began teaching in this school eight years after she had graduated from it. I do not know if the teacher with whom she shared the room had been there when she was a student, but she reflected the power structure of the school even though she saw herself as working counter to that structure.

Shannon's grade 12 English was the last class of the day, and the students often came into the room restless and obstreperous. Of the 32 students in this class, 20 were male and Shannon indicated that several of those young men took the opportunity to challenge her authority in a variety of ways. The twelve young women in the class were a silent minority. Several of them were immigrants from Africa and Asia who sat at the front of the classroom, worked diligently, and remained silent. Several others were very typical of young North American women, concerned with appearance and currying favour with the boys. They dressed in the latest fashions, sat in pairs throughout the classroom, frequently whispered to each other, and giggled at comments made by the boys in the class. None of the girls challenged the status quo during my classroom visit.



At the time of my first classroom visit, Shannon had been working with this group of students for several weeks of the current semester. She was still getting to know them, but the classroom discussions to this point led her to believe that they were critical thinkers with a strong skill base. However, she was also aware that many of them felt a sense of entitlement and silenced the minority voices in the classroom. She had not taught any of these students previously and, having taken two maternity leaves in the past three years, felt somewhat disconnected from the student population.

Shannon is an idealist who truly believes that students should have power, and I saw her encourage them to challenge the status quo. She engaged the students in discussions about school behavioural expectations and challenged them to consider why young adults needed to sit in desks or ask permission to go to the bathroom. Unfortunately, some of the students did not have the skills to balance respect with their challenges, and Shannon expended a great deal of energy in classroom management.

Shannon planned well and had obviously given a great deal of thought to the lesson. She began the class by explaining that they would be looking at the ways poets manipulated language to “break through the silences imposed by language rules,” and that this focus was connected to my presence in the classroom. She had prepared the students for my arrival and gave me an opportunity to introduce myself and tell the students about the research study. When I spoke to the class, I introduced the concept of critical literary theories as lenses providing different ways of interpreting literature. I had prepared the glossary of critical terms and had given it to Shannon when I met her prior to class. At

this time, she wrote the definitions of postcolonial and Aboriginal literary theory on the board and a short discussion ensued.

Shannon then moved on to the literature she had selected for this class. She began by introducing the topic of second language learning and related a personal story of participating in a French immersion summer program. Several of the students in the class had English as a second language and could identify with some of the difficulties inherent in communicating in an unfamiliar language. Shannon then introduced “Discourse on the Logic of Language,” a poem by Marlene Nourbese Philip that played with the words “language,” “anguish,” and “languish” to describe the North American slave population’s forced loss of African languages and acquisition of English. At all points, Shannon attempted to draw the students into discussion through the use of directed questions and personal anecdotes. Shannon connected back to an earlier poem they had studied, “the tomato conspiracy” by Bill Bissett. In her interpretation of this poem “all of our public utterances were ‘subjected to the chemical spray’ of ‘standard’ English.” In connecting to Bissett’s poem, Shannon hoped that the students would understand how the annihilation of mother tongues and the substitution of English led to communication difficulties.

Shannon then moved the students on to a poem by Marilyn Dumont entitled “The Devil’s Language.” She asked the students to look at the syntax and the register that Dumont employed and determine how it reflected the Métis experience with standard English. Following a brief attempt at a class discussion, Shannon asked the students to work together with a partner and consider the use of language in Louise Halfe’s poem “Der

Poop. ” She had provided the students with several questions that they could use in their interpretation and analysis.

Following the class, Shannon and I spent some time discussing the behaviour in the classroom and the lesson itself. Shannon felt that the students were unused to this thematic approach to teaching English. They were used to a genre approach and their comfort zone was being pushed. They often asked when they would begin studying a novel and seemed to want a familiar structure to the subject. Shannon felt that perhaps their reaction was a result of this discomfort.

Shannon was still very interested in the project, but felt that she needed more time to build relationships with her students before an outsider stepped on to the scene. We talked and planned together, but I did not visit her classroom again until near the end of the semester.

### **Personal Issues**

Our relationship developed outside of the classroom as we worked on ideas and plans for her classroom. Shannon perceived me as an expert whose advice she sought in expanding her teaching toolbox as an English teacher. Her ability to think deeply about what she was doing in the classroom was reflected in her dealings with the curriculum.

Shannon was passionate about teaching, about literature, and about social justice. These passions made her a dynamic individual to work with but sometimes led her in many

directions and made it difficult for her to focus on one thing. This eclecticism was both a strength and a weakness in terms of this research project.

### **Shannon as teacher**

When Shannon and I met following the initial classroom visit, our discussion obviously began with the issues that had been apparent during my classroom visit. When Shannon returned to the classroom following the weekend, she spoke with the students about Friday's class and was optimistic about improving relationships and the learning environment. She also spoke to the students about the different approach she took to teaching and how that might be causing them difficulty:

And I also was very upfront with them about the mental fatigue they might be experiencing; we started off that way, and I think that might be one of the reasons we had a really good class and got back on the right track.

Shannon also identified some other issues that may have been at work in her classroom. She was concerned with the ways in which the students viewed her as a teacher, viewed English as a subject, and, as a result, resisted what she was trying to do. She felt that some of the values that had been stressed in other areas of their lives made it difficult for them to take her seriously. By asking them to question their stereotypes and prejudices, she was also asking them to question the basic tenets of their belief system:

And there's gender stuff going on there too. And I think some of the guys are wrestling with what I represent to them. And it's mostly going to work out, but I'm asking them to value something, and they don't want to change the way they value English. They don't. And they resent, they resist the transformative potential in that room. ... and also for some of them it's a challenge to really value wisdom coming... seeing a woman as a potential source of wisdom and direction in your life and in an intellectual field. I think that's a real challenge. These are Catholic boys after all. They haven't seen women in the pulpit.

When reflecting on previous classes with this group of students, Shannon realized that she had already been pushing them to confront a variety of issues and that the students were likely feeling off balance. Her earlier work with Fred Wah's (1996) poetry and Spike Lee's biography of Malcolm X had forced the students to confront some of the underlying racism in North American society, and they were not necessarily happy with what they saw in society and in themselves. In all likelihood, the students were in denial and not ready to be pushed further. Looking at language as resistance in Aboriginal poetry brought the issues much too close to home. Shannon recognized that she had already shaken their foundational values and beliefs:

I had a whole week where we were on the windy ledge of race, the definition of race and I swear I came out of that room and I needed to hold on to a railing and catch my breath. And I wasn't totally sure of what was happening there, but we all knew something was going on, shifting the paradigm and watching them fall a little bit, lots of discomfort, facial expressions, knitted brows, confusion, figuring things out, really interesting.

At this point, Shannon had developed an identity as a harbinger of different truths and new ways of looking at the world. Not only were her students not ready for this, her colleagues were also resistant. In her eyes, she had developed a reputation as a "bleeding heart liberal" and felt that she was not taken seriously by her fellow teachers. She saw herself as an anomaly, one of two English teachers in her school who took the new curriculum seriously and who acted on the mandates set forth in the document. She was not content to live with the status quo and teach the way she had been taught. As a result of her activism, Shannon felt unsupported and ridiculed by her peers:

But that's a problem [Her colleagues' adherence to the status quo]. Like certain things come into the English office for example, like the advertisement for the play we went to yesterday. They're like, "oh put that in Reese's mailbox, she's into that kind of thing." I get teased about it, like "Oh some bleeding heart, you're going to some bleeding heart play today." I got that from one of my colleagues. It gets written off in lots of ways. So I actually really struggle with that, and I think that it's unique to this school. I think that if I was amongst a different set of colleagues, I could get totally different support.

Shannon viewed herself as a conscientious teacher and strove to be a reflective practitioner. She was very concerned with what she saw as lack of accountability in the system and lack of initiative on the part of other teachers. In many ways her perception of her colleagues paralleled her perceptions of her students. Both groups were resistant to change; unfortunately, the resistance of her peers to the new curriculum meant that her attempt to introduce students to this curriculum was met with resistance. The students were used to a genre approach to literature and works chosen from the school canon. They knew what to expect in English classes, and Shannon deviated from the norm. She seemed out of step with the system. The adherence to the old curriculum and the reluctance to introduce new literature that represented a broader spectrum of society was a concern not only in this school but across the province. When I told Shannon that I thought that Saskatchewan Learning was really struggling with this issue and wondered if the introduction of a new curriculum needed to be followed by the removal of the old documents. Shannon immediately made a connection to her own situation. She was very concerned about this lack of accountability in her school and saw the complacency of her colleagues as supporting the existing cultural norms. For the new curriculum to be implemented, Shannon felt that teachers needed to be supported and encouraged as the changes are mandated:

But I know from my experience here that the only way the school board can guarantee any kind of commitment to the curriculum is to hire someone and find some way of measuring if the curriculum takes.

It's created this culture that's stagnant, I've tried, you know, rifling things in peoples' mailboxes that I thought were neat, and it's like it never happened rather than it leading to a discussion, so we need to create cultures that are working together and supporting each other to do this kind of work.

Shannon was a self-reflective practitioner, always dreaming of how things could be improved and acting on those dreams. She was also an idealist that led to her frustration with the reluctance of her peers to change and the seeming inertia of the system. Although Shannon had visions of what was possible in the larger context, she was currently focused on her classroom and the potential to make a difference there. Shannon continually sought to expand her knowledge, reading widely and drawing on the expertise of others. In a large part, her involvement in this research was used to facilitate her personal growth, draw on my expertise, and have the liberty to try new things while becoming more comfortable with the curriculum content. In many ways, participation in this project validated her beliefs and encouraged her to become the teacher she dreamed of. Her continual search for knowledge was reflected in the following comment:

And I would love to learn more about the stages that a group goes through in its own cultural rehabilitation when it's been colonized – I want to be able to give my students a map, a conceptual framework that they can place themselves in. And if there is reading I can do about that process – I'd like to create a map of forks in the road, of choices that colonized writers working on decolonization personally and for other people, the choices that they have available to them.

Although Shannon was able to conceptualize the possibilities, her lived experience demeaned her dreams and stifled her potential. Her frustration with her colleagues and her students taught her to second guess her efforts as a teacher and question what she was

attempting in the classroom. Shannon often spoke of the “head-heart” connections that the students needed to make for real social change to take place. I felt that Shannon herself still struggled with those “head-heart” connections as well.<sup>14</sup> She was, however, committed to this journey, and it was more than an intellectual exercise. In the meantime, she continued to look for new ways to bring change into her classroom, change that students would embrace and would build her self-confidence as a teacher. Although she had not given up on introducing the students to different ways of looking at the world, her past experiences caused her to question her approach. She described one of those experiences that illustrated the care she took in planning and making connections but reflected her fears as well:

Like last time I started with *Big Yellow Taxi* by Joni Mitchell and got them thinking about relationships to the land and values on commercialism and all that sort of thing. I had three things that we looked at for traditional Native view of the land: we had the David Suzuki quotation that we looked at, then the quotation from *Keeper 'n Me*, which I love. “Little gurgles and chuckles like babies, the holy sound of eagle’s wings.” And then “Not Just a Platform for My Dance.” So I just did a very brief introduction, then we looked at some quotations from Irving Layton. He says, “All of civilization, all culture is in defiance of nature.” And that’s most definitely a European point of view. “It’s man’s intent to throw nature off his back, above all in its most malevolent form which is death, which is destruction, destruction of his body, and above all of his ego, of his wonderful, wonderful mind.” And then we go on and talk about that, you know this desire to separate oneself from nature, and then we segue into the story of the Dene at Great Bear Lake and these two different perspectives came into conflict and really show, you know, ultimately the connection between the people and their land. So that’s what I did last time and it might be embarrassingly simplistic, I don’t know. But, what do you think?

Rather than being embarrassingly simplistic, the connections Shannon had made were extremely complex, perhaps too complex for the students she was teaching. In her selection of literature, she attempted to guide them through some very difficult issues. It

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<sup>14</sup> Gregory Cajete (2000) identifies this struggle with head-heart connections in an Aboriginal context. He uses the Tewa term *pn geh heh* or split mind to describe the disconnect between intellect and action.



was very likely that her students had not been asked to use literature in this way before and for this reason were very resistant. Their resistance created a tension in the classroom as Shannon forced them to confront major societal issues. Shannon saw this tension as a reflection of her ability as a teacher rather than symptomatic of the mental and emotional fatigue being experienced by her students:

**Shannon:** I sort of sometimes feel like—you know the allegory of the cave – I feel like you’re coming into the cave and I’m the first person you’ve come at and you’ve just convinced me that the shadows that I see on the wall are just shadows, that they’re not real. But as you’re just turning my head toward the opening of the cave, it must be frustrating for you.

**Geraldine:** Oh no, it’s exciting.

**Shannon:** Really? I think it must be frustrating. You must just want to say, give me your class for a week, I’m going to do this.

At this point Shannon needed encouragement and validation, but in spite of my reassurances, Shannon continued to question her abilities and felt that her students would be better off in the hands of an “expert.” For this reason, she remained reluctant to invite me into her classroom, but used me as a resource to help her expand her knowledge of literature and pedagogy.

### **Introducing Aboriginal Writers**

Shannon wanted to tap into other resources in the community as well. After introducing her students to the poetry of Louise Halfe (1994, 1998) and realizing the difficulties they had with her use of English, Shannon considered bringing the poet into the classroom. She spoke with Halfe about this option and learned that requests through the Writers’ Guild needed to be made during the previous school year for the Guild to provide the writer with an honorarium. Shannon explored other options to secure the finances but

was unable to do so. She also discussed the possibility of bringing in Maria Campbell (1973, 1994) or an elder to talk about the role of story in Aboriginal culture. Shannon felt strongly that this information needed to come from someone in the culture rather than from an outsider. She was very concerned with the potential for disrespect that existed in the current sharing of stories while understanding the need to expose students to the stories of other cultures. Shannon wanted to respect both the curriculum and the Aboriginal cultures by building relationships:

What it all begins to grind down to and what I'm hearing is, "teach students this – the richness and complexity and integrity of Native literature and history and culture," and then after that there's an equal sign to less racism, and in this province there's a great deal of concern about changing demographics, and that's where part of the energy and urgency comes from. We have to change people's attitudes and change them really, really fast or we're going to have a bloody province. So that creates a problem you know. I mean, you don't just get someone's story. It's separate from a relationship in a lot of cases and for good reason. It takes a long time to build relationships.

Shannon understood that Aboriginal stories were rooted in Aboriginal communities; she also understood the urgency felt by Saskatchewan Learning to reflect and respect the demographics of the province. Balancing these two factors was a difficult and delicate task. Shannon had begun to build relationships with members of the Aboriginal writing community; affording her students the same opportunity proved more difficult.

## **Student Issues**

### **Introduction to Hybrid Identities**

Shannon's students were exposed to a diversity of literature and given tools to interpret and analyze the texts. The focus of Shannon's first literature unit with this class had been

on authors who had hybrid identities, authors who found themselves part of two contrasting worlds. In this unit, Shannon had used literature by Aboriginals such as Halfe, Campbell, and Dumont, as well as pieces by Canadians of Caribbean, Muslim, and Chinese ancestry. Her students struggled with the literature they had been given and the ways in which they had been asked to rethink their assumptions. An email from Shannon speculates on some of the reasons for this struggle:

They tend to view writers as individuals, rather than as members of minorities. They also tend to blame the "isms" (sexism, racism, etc.) on ignorant individuals, rather than on social structures. This makes it hard for them to appreciate writers who call attention to the artifice of these structures; they can be contested and changed.

In her search for better ways of sharing these critical tools and expanding the students' experiences, Shannon took advantage of community events. Her students were able to attend a performance of Leslie McCurdy's one-woman show, *Things My Fore-Sisters Saw*. McCurdy, an Afra-Canadian, focuses on four Afra-Canadian women and tells their stories. Through this experience, Shannon's grade 12 students had direct contact with a part of Canada's history that had been silenced, and students were able to extend their knowledge of anti-Black racism from their classroom study of *Malcolm X* to their own national history. Suddenly, racism was made more pertinent because it did not just happen in the United States, and they were able to see how the existing resources constructed their knowledge:

The students and I had already had a lengthy discussion where first of all we pooled our knowledge about Black Canadian history, and then I got them to evaluate their knowledge and how they felt about it, and they were kind of embarrassed actually. And then we talked about why they knew so little, and they did amazing work, just brainstorming, "Why haven't we heard these stories?" And then we had a runner go and get the Canadian history text that we use here, and so we did a little analysis of the history textbook and which stories get a lot of space and which ones don't.

By seeking out experiences such as this, Shannon provided her students with contexts that expanded their world views. They were able to enter into discussions that continued this expansion of ideas. Shannon was able to use her eclectic knowledge and interests to pull together ideas from a diversity of sources in the classroom discussion that followed the viewing of the play. Having made these connections in the context of the Afro-Canadians and the civil rights movement, Shannon hoped that the students would be able to extend their knowledge and understanding to the interpretation of other literatures and issues. However, when it came to dealing with Aboriginal literature and issues, issues that were much closer to home than Afro-Canadian issues, the students were more resistant.

### **The Manipulation of Language in Aboriginal Literature**

The students were able to enter into discussions on civil rights affecting other Canadian minority groups, but discussion of issues concerning the minority group most stigmatized in their communities remained difficult. Although Shannon spent considerable time introducing the students to the manipulation of language, and they were able to see how Bill Bissett used it, they were unable to transfer that understanding to the poetry of Louise Halfe:

None of them get it. So I asked them what rules of standard English does she break? (reading from student work) "The poet breaks the rules of standard English in the poem by improper sentence structure, no capitalization whatsoever," which is not true, "and flagrantly misspelling common English words," but then here's the justification, "by doing so she gets across the point that even though she is not a manager of the English language, she will make an attempt at using it if that is what it will take in order to express herself and get the point across."

And it's also the dumb Indian stereotype that Marilyn Dumont sees in "The Devil's Language," one misspelled word and you're a dumb,

drunk Indian. So that's the conclusion then: she's not a master of the language.

Shannon and I found it both ironic and worrisome that the students were unable to make these transferences. We found it ironic that they were able to identify word and language play and manipulation in one context and not in another. We found it worrisome because their inability to recognize the manipulation of language seemed to be race based. It seemed that their prejudices concerning Aboriginal peoples influenced their abilities to interpret this literature respectfully. This was one of the issues that prompted me to engage in this research study. The question that remained to be answered was whether or not exposure to the literature and a variety of interpretive tools enabled students to interpret Aboriginal literature with respect and understanding.

The discussion of language manipulation continued as Shannon was preparing to introduce the students to Maria Campbell's *Stories of the Road Allowance People*. Shannon introduced this section by leading a simulation related to oral traditions and then asking the students how they would recover stories from a community. She introduced the oral tradition through a technique used by Greg Sarris (1993) in which he gave each student the task of retelling a told story. Through this experience, students were able to see how the personal influences the retelling. Shannon had three students retell the story she had told, and each of them noted different details and had a different objective in their interpretation and retelling. Following this exercise, Shannon moved into a conversation about the oral tradition where she learned that their assumptions about story were based on their experiences in Eurocentric traditions, concluding that "this idea of a story belonging to a people is foreign to them."

From this introduction to storytelling, Shannon asked the students how they would go about recovering the stories of a people as Maria Campbell done. The students were able to identify several key issues and with Shannon's guidance, they were also able to identify some of the hurdles that needed to be surmounted. They identified the first task as finding the storyteller and a translator. Shannon pointed out the necessity of building a relationship of trust before the storyteller might be ready to share stories. After their experience with storytelling, they realized that the storyteller would need to know whether or not you would be a "safe carrier" of the story. She also asked them if they could think of anything better than a translator, and the students agreed that knowing the language would be better but that would entail living in the community. However, the students realized that long-term connections to the community would lead to a greater understanding of the story:

And one of the students said, "Well you'd have to almost immerse yourself in the culture to figure out what matters to them, so when you read the story, you see how their values are in the story."

The students felt that the next steps would be to audiotape and transcribe the story. The students were divided on the shape that that transcription should take. One student felt that the story needed to be released in an oral form "so that the storyteller would forever be connected to his own story." The question arising from this approach was "how do you manipulate sound onto the page so that it sounds the way you hear, with that voice in the mind?" Another student felt differently about the final product: "Well once you understand the story from inside them, you should write them in standard English so everyone also understands." Shannon used this opportunity to reconnect to earlier discussions on the use of standard English and the manipulation of English:

And I said, " Well, did the person who wrote the tomato conspiracy poem write in standard English?" "No." And I said, " And did that interfere with communication?" "No." In fact it actually advanced a whole argument through the language use itself. And I said, "Why are you choosing to use standard English now?"

Although the students were beginning to make connections, they were still unable to make the leap necessary to accept Halfe's and Campbell's reinvention of the language. Their conceptualization of English literature did not allow them to see artistry in language that was manipulated to reflect cultural lects. They saw bissett as having mastered English and therefore able to play with its structures while they saw Halfe and Campbell as having a language deficit and doing the best they could with the levels of facility they had. By introducing them to these concepts, Shannon was asking them to question the world as they saw it. The ensuing cognitive dissonance caused them to see Shannon's class as the problem rather than questioning the lack of exposure in their previous English classes.

### **Theoretical Issues**

Shannon's perception of her students' experiences in other English classes may have been the root of some of the problems the students were having with her approach. If her assessment of her colleagues was correct, and her conversations with them and the responses her students gave would suggest that it was, students had had a very canonical exposure to literature. As much research indicates (Banks, 1993; Guillory, 1993; McCarthy, 1993), a school canon exists, and teachers are loath to deviate from that canon. This choice may be the result of personal preference, what is available in the school's book room, and/or lack of ongoing professional development. It is probably

closely tied to teachers' individual educational and life experiences. Whatever the cause, the result was students that were entrenched in a genre approach and had very narrow definitions of what constituted good literature. When Shannon introduced students to texts that did not fit the norm, the students discovered that they did not have the tools to make sense of things.

### **Introducing Regional Voices**

Shannon was committed to the new curriculum and expanding the students' experiences with literature. However, the resistance she perceived led her to believe that students needed to be introduced to these concepts much earlier. By grade 12, previous experiences had led them to anticipate what English would be like. Shannon described the attitudes of her colleagues and the resulting attitudes of the students:

There's still this attitude that students pick up elsewhere that the value of a piece of literature is its claim to being universal. And the problem too is that there's that old idea that it's the canon, the canon is wonderful, and then not wanting to open up the canon.

In Shannon's experience, teachers have difficulty developing the Canadian literature semester because they do not have the expertise and support necessary to feel successful:

And there's a wonderful teacher who works in the AP program who said, "Oh I can't stand the A30 course. What do you teach?" And I love Canadian lit, and I feel that if I read nothing but Canadian lit I'd never get to read it all. But there's this need of inservicing around the 30A course to get teachers excited about what they can do. Because I think they're kind of bemoaning the fact that they're giving up texts that they loved and taught for a long time and not sure how to move into what's new.

For this portion of the curriculum to be successfully implemented, teachers need a greater knowledge of Canadian literature. They are unaware of much recent literature and rely on the texts they were taught in high school and university. Depending on when they



completed their education, they may not have read much contemporary Canadian literature or texts authored by Canadians of non-European ancestry. They need to become familiar with texts, and they also need to know how to interpret these texts.

The Canadian literature semester focuses on regional voices. Shannon chose Northern voices as one of her regional foci during the course of this research. She made this choice for two reasons. First, her experience in teaching Aboriginal literature to the students had been met by resistance based on their existing stereotypes and prejudices. She felt that Northern literature, particularly literature coming out of the Inuit tradition and experience, would not suffer the same judgment. The students had no experience with the Inuit, and therefore their pre-existing stereotypes were not as negative. If anything, their knowledge of the north was limited and tinged with romanticism. Second, by using Northern literature Shannon drew on my expertise because I was able to provide her with resources and information. She asked me to co-teach this unit with her, and I agreed. This enabled me to share some of my knowledge and to have access to her classroom again.

Shannon initiated the development of the Northern voices unit and turned to the curriculum for support and information. Shannon was frustrated by what was available in the curriculum documents in reference to Northern literature. Although it was suggested as a possible regional voice, Shannon recognized the frustrations teachers faced when assembling new units:

In the curriculum it says you might want to do Northern lit and here's a splash of titles but I don't understand why the curriculum developers wouldn't just put together a package and hand it out

because the individual teacher then has to go hunting around the city libraries looking for these individual texts, and it's hard, and a lot of teachers don't have time to do that, and so sometimes just to have someone bring you the resources overcomes a huge obstacle, you know.

Shannon's perception of the available support for Northern voices may also explain why other teachers have had difficulty developing units based on Aboriginal voices. Teachers, responsible for unit planning and development, must find the necessary texts; resources that support other Canadian regions and voices are more accessible. The curriculum documents suggest possible texts to be included in a Northern unit, and Shannon and I exchanged a series of emails as we collected resources for this unit:

**Shannon:** I'm preparing to teach a unit on regional voices. Sometime I'd like to talk to you about selections by Northern writers which would give the students a sense of how geography has shaped culture and voice in Northern Canada. [Shannon provided a list of texts suggested in the curriculum guide.]

**Geraldine:** I find it interesting to note that all of these pieces are written by southern white authors. Where is the Indigenous voice?

**Shannon:** Interesting comment about the authors. I phoned the English Language Arts consultant with the school board to inquire about these resources. She did not know where I could find any of them and claimed that I am the first teacher who has ever called her expressing an interest in teaching them.

Shannon and I met to plan this unit and discussed possible approaches. I provided her with many of my resources, literary, historical, and anthropological, and she went home to do some reading and develop some background. When Shannon and I again met, we elected to use texts that had been authored, co-authored, or narrated by Inuit. Shannon put together a readings package that included translations of traditional drum dance songs, stories of survival, myths and legends, and personal narratives. I collected Arctic

images and music, and developed a PowerPoint presentation to set the scene and establish context.

By providing the necessary historical and cultural information, we were able to introduce literature that was not part of the traditional school canon. The students were receptive and curious as Shannon and I shared literature and stories with them. What remained to be seen was how they interpreted these texts. Shannon was hopeful that they would be able to choose lenses that reflected cultural sensitivity rather than their personal and collective biases.

### **Interpretive Possibilities**

In our initial conversations, Shannon and I spent a great deal of time talking about literary theory and the wide range of interpretive possibilities that the various theoretical approaches allowed. Because Shannon saw the transformative power of literature, she was interested in exposing her students to these lenses. Shannon's experience with postcolonial literature and theory had been a powerful personal experience that left her unable to teach only traditional literature and interpretive skills. Prior to working with me on this project, she had not considered naming the strategies that she used. She and I also assumed that the students were cognizant of the fact that they were interpreting a text. She discovered that that was not necessarily so:

They seem quite steeped in the notion that good literature is "universal" and that particularities of time, place, gender, linguistic competence, etc. are mere details left behind when the essence of the story is appreciated.

Shannon's discovery of how little her students actually understood about their role as critical readers confirmed my initial motivation in designing this research study. I firmly believed students were too often unaware of their role in the interpretation of text. As teachers, we have spent too much time giving them the answers to the text, identifying the themes that we saw, or passing on the scholarship found in the teacher's manual accompanying the anthologies. Because we did not name and explain the strategies, students were left believing that interpretation was either impossible or magical, but definitely not independently achievable for them.

### **Postcolonial Contexts**

Shannon continued to struggle with naming the theories and having the students name the lenses as they interpreted literature. Ultimately, she chose not to name the lenses but became more cognizant of her own use of theory as she interpreted the literature and shared those interpretations with her students. Shannon focused on choosing literature that would expose her students to postcolonial contexts. Because of her school community, Shannon felt that multicultural issues were as important as Aboriginal issues and chose not to make Aboriginal literature a central focus of her program but to integrate it with other Canadian literature. Because there were no visible Aboriginal students in her classroom, using texts that would validate the experiences of only that minority was not a consideration; she wished to validate the experiences of the visible minorities as well.

Ultimately, Shannon and I wondered how to prepare individuals for decolonization. She recognized that she was ready to begin developing an understanding when she took

postcolonial literature as part of graduate studies. What experiences had she had that made her receptive to these ideas? Shannon felt that students needed to be exposed to these ideas in many different contexts, not just the English classroom:

You know what's funny? History teaches about the Americans who are out scrambling to change everything, right. They [students and teachers] get, like, trapped in the world wars and they finally win it and get to postcolonialism and they never get through it. Students never get to the human side that prepares them to live in their world.

Although Shannon frequently felt as if she were a minority working toward change, toward disrupting the status quo, perhaps she was helping to position students so that they would be receptive when exposed to postcolonial ideas at another point in time. Shannon, however, firmly believed that the students would be more receptive to new ideas and that change would occur more quickly if more teachers chose to introduce students to these ideas.

### **Seeing Through Story**

Although Shannon was fairly confident in her understanding of the postcolonial lens, she was not as confident when it came to the Aboriginal lens. She had had previous experience with postcolonialism and had had the opportunity to read both theory and literature. Aboriginal literary theory was new to her, and she looked for ways to connect her understandings with the theoretical perspective. Shannon found several different ways to connect to the Aboriginal lens. First, she saw the connection to story: the oral tradition and the stories of a people. She gave her students opportunity to develop an understanding of story by having them engage in a simulation. By retelling stories, they were able to see how a story changes, depending on the teller. Shannon was able to

connect this experience of retelling to the stories of Maria Campbell. In this way the students were able to understand how the story would reflect the values of the community. Connecting the students to the purpose of story was one way in which Shannon used the Aboriginal lens.

Shannon also chose to use the Aboriginal lens by giving the students poetry and short prose selections that contrasted European views of and use of the land with Aboriginal views of and use of the land. Through this experience, she hoped students would see how a community's values were reflected in its literature. She also hoped that this might be a springboard to understanding the value of reading through a diversity of lenses. As Shannon looked for ways to introduce her students to the Aboriginal lens, she also looked for ways that *she* could connect to this lens and further her own understanding. She reflected on her past studies in literature and drew on an analogy provided by one of her professors:

I remember him talking to us about genres and the development of genres and he talked about how when the first novels were published, it's almost like the writers had to put in handrails for the readers to hang on to, teaching them how to be an ideal reader for the emerging genre.

Shannon speculated that the same would be true of Aboriginal literature; the handrails were contained in the text, and the theory emerged from an understanding of these handrails. Her concern, then, was to enable her students to use these rails when reading texts that were dissimilar to those they had previously experienced:

I need to surround the literature not just with more historical context, social context, the interdisciplinary surrounding for it, but also know, what do these writers themselves, what handrails do they give us to teach us to be their own ideal readers.

Shannon [had](#) hoped that bringing in Louis Halfe would be a way to do that; she would be able to teach Shannon and the students to be ideal readers of her work. Unfortunately, Shannon was not able to organize that experience. She did, however, continue to look at language as resistance, and this became a central issue in her teaching.

### **Language as Resistance**

From the beginning of the semester when Shannon introduced the students to the poetry of Bill Bissett, she had been using literature that subverted standard English. Each writer and filmmaker that she included used a variety of English to resist the dominant culture and make a political or cultural point. In many ways, Shannon's class was about resistance as she exposed students to a variety of power struggles. She encouraged them to question their own powerlessness and challenge the status quo in their school, families, and cultures. And the students responded with resistance. In reflecting on what happened in her classroom, Shannon thought of what she might do differently the next time she taught this course:

You have to be very, very interdisciplinary and not etched in anything. So blending of history and English is really, really, really important so they have the scaffolding to get to those more literary concepts. But also just their understanding of language; they've never looked at language as an artifact before, as something outside of themselves, something that can be purposefully used to control. So there's a lot cognitively that they're grappling with for the very, very first time.

In addition to providing them with more historical context, Shannon was interested in learning about the cognitive abilities of grade 12 students. Were we asking too much of them? Perhaps they were unable to extend their thinking this far. Or did they seem cognitively unable because this was the first time they had been asked to think in these

ways? Shannon acknowledged their inexperience in examining language as a tool. To this point, they had seen language as transparent and had paid little attention to the way it could be manipulated:

They're getting on this edge because for the first time they're talking about language. But then to take it to Maria Campbell and have them appreciate what she's doing there, it's slightly beyond them. I think the story itself, they really get, but the form is too much.

Shannon reflected on her own experiences with postcolonial literature and understandings and realized that she did not awaken to them until she was much older than her students are now. She did not speculate on whether that was tied to her cognitive abilities or her experiences, and knowing what factors worked together to bring her to her current understandings may have helped her in determining how her students might be moved to new understandings.

### **In Kate's Classroom**

#### **Description**

My first visit to Kate's classroom occurred one month into the winter semester. By this time, she had worked with her students to develop rapport and expectations. Because this class occurred in the first period after the lunch break, Kate and I usually met for lunch and talked about our lives and our research. Over the semester, I frequently had the opportunity to participate in Kate's class.



Kate's classroom was very typical of a high school classroom in a school built in the 1960s. There was one window with a view of an exit from that building and the parking lot. The window did provide natural light, and Kate had several healthy plants and her desk in this back corner of the room. The student desks were arranged in rows, but Kate was quick to reorganize as the need arose. The first day I was in the classroom, the desks were moved to create a conversational circle and then rearranged one more time to facilitate small group work. Students eagerly rearranged the furniture to suit the activity and then returned it to rows before the next class arrived. One side wall had bookshelves that held a variety of professional resources, dictionaries, and extra copies of class texts, and the other side wall had posters and samples of student work. The front wall was covered with boards, and the back of the room had a storage cabinet, Kate's computer, and desk. Although Kate's classroom was neat and well organized, it was not sterile. It was obvious that this was a space where English was taught, students were respected, and learning happened.

Kate's manner with her students was calm and quiet. She obviously knew each of them and was able to ask questions about their lives, engage in banter, and make jokes with them. The students, who felt very comfortable in this space, were able to share their ideas, return the banter, and ask questions. Although they felt free to challenge ideas and state their opinions, they understood that Kate was the teacher, and they respected her authority.

In preparing for the research study, Kate and I had decided that she would conduct her classes in the same way she always had. She would continue to incorporate Aboriginal

literature but would be more conscious of choosing pieces that focused on community and views of the land. She would also introduce the students to the critical lenses and design assignments that asked them to use these lenses in their interpretations of the literary works.

Kate had prepared the students for my arrival and they understood that they were participating in a research study. During my first visit to the classroom, I had the opportunity to introduce myself and share with them the purpose of the research. None of the students had previously been involved in anything of this nature, and they were eager participants. Some of the students, the group Kate would describe as her “white hockey players,” were excited at the prospect of being quoted in my thesis. On subsequent visits, they often asked if I had quoted them yet. Before the end of the first classroom visit, I felt welcome and noted that the students and Kate seemed comfortable with my presence.

After introductions, Kate asked the students to think back to some poetry and short stories that they had read in previous classes. She asked them to consider specifically the view of the land presented by the writers. In their discussion, the students were able to contrast the views represented by A. J. M. Smith in “The Lonely Land” and Sinclair Ross in “The Painted Door” with that of Marilyn Dumont in “Not Just a Platform for My Dance.” Following this discussion, Kate distributed copies of a Beth Cuthand poem, “Four Songs for the Fifth Generation.” She connected this poem to the earlier discussion by telling the students that Cuthand provides a view of the land over time. She also used the metaphor of an onion to explain the layered way in which stories, in general, are

interpreted; the different layers are revealed as the reader/listener is ready to hear them. After providing some biographical information on the author, Kate asked the students to move into groups of four. Each group was responsible for a section of the poem, one of the four songs, and asked to find the layers in that song. Kate gave the students 20 minutes in their small groups and moved from group to group, listening to the discussion, answering questions, and ensuring that students remained on task. This initial experience in Kate's classroom gave me a good sense of who she was as a teacher and who her students were.

## **Theoretical Issues**

### **Introducing Critical Lenses**

Nine days after my initial observations, I returned to Kate's classroom for my second visit. During this class, students were introduced to the critical lenses. In my first visit, I had introduced the students to the concept of lenses as varying ways of looking at the same object and seeing different aspects. This day, they were given as a handout the glossary of critical lenses (Appendix C). Kate explained that although we use theory in literature, we are not as explicit about naming it as we are in disciplines like science and psychology. In those disciplines, a great deal of time is spent in the discussion of theory and its applications. Kate pointed out that interpreters of literature use theory to analyze literature even if the theory is not named. There is no magic way of discovering the meaning of a text, and the skill of interpretation becomes easier with access to the tools and an understanding of those tools. Kate then led the class in a discussion of the various lenses, explaining what each lens focused on. She also asked students to think back to

works of literature they had studied and consider the interpretive lens she or other teachers may have used. Kate continually connected the ways that she used theory to interpret texts, showing the students how she used the lenses to arrive at the meaning of a work. Kate left them with this challenge: “Can you see how, depending on your interests and biases, you can use one theory over another?”

Over the previous week, the students had been studying a play by Sharon Pollock, *The Komagata Maru Incident*, and were now preparing to write a literary essay. As part of their writing preparation, the students were asked to apply literary theory to *The Kamagata Maru Incident* and consider these questions: Which critical theory is the best fit for this text? Why? How would you use it to interpret the play? Where would you focus your lens? Most of the students chose the socio-historical and biographical lens as is shown in these excerpts from their assignments:

Krista: I think the socio-historical and biographical criticism is the best fit for this play because in order to understand the play, you need to understand what happened in history.

Alexa: The Socio-historical and Biographical Criticism would be the best theory for this text. This theory shows how it is important to understand the past and the society in the past, to understand the piece of literature that you are reading... We may understand the literature better if we understood how people thought and acted in those days, different people's point of views and other events that happened in the past to influence this incident.

However, several of the students were able to move beyond the most obvious critical lens and demonstrate how a different lens would lead to a different understanding of the play. Brandon identified socio-historical criticism as one possible way of interpreting the piece but also saw the potential of applying a feminist lens. He was able to articulate the benefits of using a variety of lenses to examine a literary text:

Brandon: The socio-historical lens deals with understanding the era in which a piece of literature was written in order to better understand that piece of literature. In order to understand the characters in the play we must first understand that their beliefs and actions in the play were very normal at the time. The feminist lens is also useful with regard to this text because of the character of the woman Evy. Evy's opinions and beliefs are more in line with ours today. She is, however, largely ignored because she is a woman. To the present-day reader, she seems the most sensible person and so in order to understand why her opinions are dismissed, we must first understand the way in which women's opinions were treated in history.

Robert used the Marxist lens in order to interpret this play, emphasizing the relationship of economics and racism in Canadian history:

Robert: I believe Marxist criticism would be the most accurate way to interpret the play. The main overview of the story includes a group of immigrants entering a society in Vancouver. The Canadian Immigration officials select Hopkinson to retaliate by not allowing them to stay. This is done so there is no economic flux or change that would have a negative impact on Canadian citizens. Since Marxist criticism focuses on "Class struggle or economic factors as motivation for character actions and reaction", it would be appropriate to use this lens.

This initial introduction to the use of critical lenses gave the students opportunity to examine a literary text using a variety of interpretive strategies. They were able to see how using a lens provided them with the tools needed to understand the text. Although many of the students saw the socio-historical lens as the most obvious choice to interpret an historical drama, several recognized how changing the lens enabled them to shed new light on the play and develop a deeper understanding.

### **Interpreting Aboriginal Literature**

I returned to Kate's classroom when the students began their book studies. Kate had decided to use full length narratives authored by Canadian Aboriginals and to give the

students choice in selecting the work they wished to read. She provided students with copies of Richard Wagamese's (1994) *Keeper 'n Me*, Maria Campbell's (1973) *Halfbreed*, and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's (1999) *In Search of April Raintree*. Students in the class selected one of the full-length works and formed four literature circles (Daniels, 1994), two focusing on *Halfbreed* and one group on each of the other texts. Over the next few weeks, students used a structured format to read and discuss the books. Each student was committed to reading a certain amount of the text and had a specific responsibility in the discussion that ensued. Kate introduced the students to the format of the literature circle because many of them had not had experience with that approach to text discussion previously. Initially the roles were important in ensuring that each student came to class prepared to discuss the text and participate in the circle. As the book study progressed, some of the groups became more involved in the discussion and the roles were of less importance. These groups were able to focus on the issues in the text and brought their own experiences and questions to the discussions. Other groups still relied on the roles as the basis of their discussion.

In my classroom visits during this time, I was able to move about the class and listen to the various groups in their discussions of the text. In our conversations, Kate and I talked about the discussions that were occurring and the insights the students had into the texts. Because Kate was in the classroom each day, she was able to see how the students grappled with the issues raised in the books. Several interesting things surfaced during the students' study.

One of the literature circles was made up of four young men and one young woman. Most of the students in the group were average academic achievers, and all appeared to be of European descent. One of the men was very much the centre of attention in the classroom and the group. Curtis was the student who frequently asked me if he had been quoted in my book yet. He seemed quite proud of his status as a “partier” and “tough guy” and often dominated classroom discussions. One day, during the discussion time, Sarah’s role suggested that she bring an artifact related to the book. The artifact she chose to bring was a beaded necklace in a style frequently associated with Aboriginal cultures. This necklace led to an interesting exchange between Sarah and Curtis. When Curtis asked Sarah where she got the necklace, she responded by saying it was her brother’s and he had made it in the Native Teacher Education Program. Curtis seemed quite surprised and said, “But you’re not Métis or anything!” When Sarah indicated that her family was indeed Métis, the group was surprised and did not know how to respond. They quickly moved on to other topics and did not return to Sarah’s disclosure in any of the conversations Kate and I heard.

However, this kind of disclosure was repeated in the literature circle reading *In Search of April Raintree*. Here, the students were comparing the two sisters in the novel, April and Cheryl, one of whom was more visibly Aboriginal than the other. Like the other group, all members of this group appeared to be of European ancestry. As in the other group, all was not as it appeared on the surface. During this discussion, one young woman spoke of her father who was treaty<sup>15</sup> and another young woman disclosed her Métis heritage.

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<sup>15</sup> Treaty is a Canadian term used to describe a status Indian who is a member of a band that entered into a treaty with the Canadian government.

These young women were not visibly Aboriginal and they described themselves as “invisible members of a visible minority.” In their estimation, this invisibility had social advantage in their school and community.

These disclosures were of considerable interest for a variety of reasons. First, in many ways, these three young women’s stories paralleled Kate’s. As invisible members of a visible minority, they, like Kate, were able to function in the school and community without being labelled. Their invisibility enabled them to be the same as, not different from, their peers and gave them access to opportunities and social circles that their visible Aboriginal peers did not enjoy. They moved through the school and community as members of the dominant culture. At this point in their lives, they seemed to be thankful for that anonymity. I wonder if, like Kate, they would come to wonder if they were “us or them” as they age and mature. Second, within the group studying *April Raintree*, Casey and Darlene were able to speak with some authority. They had an understanding of the circumstances experienced by Cheryl and April that their peers did not share. Both of these young women had made conscious choices about the disclosure of their heritage, and those choices may have been supported or initiated by their families. Within this literature circle, the other members of the group valued their knowledge and understandings. This did not happen in Sarah’s group where she later attempted to retract her disclosure by saying, “Like I’m Métis, but not really.” It would seem as if Sarah saw her disclosure as a mistake, and she was now fearful that she would be perceived as one of “them.”



In terms of my research study, these disclosures were of interest for several reasons, most of which are ponderings rather than conclusions. I am curious as to whether or not these three young women would have made these disclosures had they not been studying Aboriginal literature, supporting the premise that the teaching of multicultural literature enables students to see themselves and their struggles reflected in the classroom. Kate's position as a possible role model may also have been a factor in their disclosures. Because the students knew Kate was Métis, disclosing their own origins may have felt safe. And finally, the focus on Aboriginal literary criticism may also have validated the heritage of these students.

Kate knew that other students in the class also were of Aboriginal ancestry, and it is likely that there were other students who were "invisible members of a visible minority" but they chose not to disclose. Their reasons are unknown, but I would speculate that they perceived the risk as too great. Their invisibility offered them safety and access to the dominant culture, and they were unwilling to jeopardize their current status.

Upon completion of the reading and discussion, each literature circle was required to make a presentation to the class based on their book. I had the opportunity to view three of these presentations. Meeting with Kate over lunch before one of my classroom visits, she commented, "I wish you could have been here for the discussion of *April Raintree*." The students who had participated in that literature circle showed clear understandings of the issues in the text and were able to discuss the plight of the characters with empathy. In Kate's opinion, the book study and the application of the Aboriginal lens had given them greater insights into the issues facing Aboriginals, and she was hopeful that they

would be able to extrapolate these understandings into their community. Both Kate and Shannon expressed concern over the ability of students to make both a heart and head connection to the issues. They felt that students often saw the overt forms of racism described in the literature as historical incidents that were no longer major factors in contemporary society. Kate was optimistic about this particular group's ability to connect the issues in the novel with their lived experiences.

That afternoon, the literature circle that had read *Keeper 'n Me* presented to the class. This group was made up of several students who were not really into English, one young man who loved to read fantasy and felt all other literature was a waste of his time, and a young woman who was very motivated. Although not being above average students, this group had put considerable effort into their presentation and were able to articulate some of their understandings. When asked if studying the novel had opened their views, they indicated that they had developed a better understanding of Aboriginal issues. They did not see the events in the novel restricted to the past and felt that the treatment of Aboriginals had not necessarily changed. The events in the novel connected with their lived experiences.

I returned to Kate's classroom after the weekend for the last of the group presentations. On this day, the two groups who had studied *Halfbreed* were presenting to the class. These presentations provided an interesting contrast in the ability of students to grapple with a literary text. This group, that included Curtis and Sarah, was very superficial in their interpretation, rarely moving beyond the actual events in the text. They had developed a trivia game based on the incidents in the text and provided little in way of

discussion beyond a plot summary. Rather than seeing the issues underlying the events in Campbell's life as mitigating factors in the choices she made, they saw her choices as reinforcing their perceptions of Aboriginals. They were also proponents of the "that was then, this is now" philosophy, and saw most Aboriginals as victims of their personal and collective choices rather than as victims of colonization.

The last group formatted their presentation as a video and, of the three groups I saw, were best able to make connections between the text and contemporary society. The students began their video by offering these opinions on the effectiveness of the autobiographical text:

Courtney: I thought it was interesting to read. You got someone else's perspective of the life of the Métis people at that time, and you wouldn't really know about it any other way unless you read about what they believed.

Andrea: It was really good. It was kind of close to here so we could relate to it.

Robert: I thought it was a really good representation of cultural groups and the challenges they had to deal with, like the new people, white settlers and different lifestyle changes and the hardships that go along with it. It's really hard to change for the good without changing for the worst first.

These comments again illustrate the ability of literature to connect the reader with the lives and experiences of others. For this group, Maria Campbell's work provided them with the opportunity to understand the history underlying the issues they saw in their community.

They continued the video by discussing the themes they felt were significant in the autobiography and showed how these themes were interconnected. Courtney felt that

poverty was a central theme, and Robert saw how poverty was closely linked to the changes that Campbell's family underwent. He understood that circumstances led to Campbell's choices; the changes that denied her family land led to poverty, a lack of education, a distrust of authority, and a sense of belonging to a small insular community:

Maria wasn't an Aboriginal or a white person. She was Métis so she had a lot of trouble fitting in places...so her lifestyle was affected in a large degree. She had a lot of challenges. She really hated the Aboriginal people because they were always picked on. She was always picked on in school as a little kid, so later in life when she got to know white people, she kind of hated that too because white people would always be doing the picking on the Métis and the Aboriginals.

Although having students read with empathy by using a lens that does not focus a colonial gaze on the text was one goal of this research project, another goal was to see if reading through this lens enabled the students to change their thinking and perhaps their actions. Courtney was able to make the connections between the treatment of the Métis in the book with the treatment of Métis in her community: "How they were treated in their life is also kind of the same as they're treated today, like that hasn't even changed so much." Robert identified the need for change and was able to take the first step toward these changes by articulating the importance of studying a work like *Halfbreed*:

I think if we have to make big progressions in the country, culture, everything like that; I think we have to recognize the things that were brought up in this book otherwise history kind of repeats itself. Things are very similar between then and now although they're presented kind of different, but we can learn from that and make changes for the better.

Intellectually, this group of students understood the issues in the text; they had made the "head" connection, but the bigger question remained: were they also able to make the

“heart” connection and would their personal attitudes and actions be affected by this study?

## **Student Issues**

### **Revealing Entrenched Racism**

The rift between the “head” and “heart” connections was perhaps greater than either Kate or I foresaw. After the students completed their presentations, Kate and I felt quite positive about the perceptions and interpretations of the students. They had said many of the things we hoped to hear, and we were optimistic that these might represent changes in attitudes. I wondered whether or not the students would be doing written evaluations, and, in response, Kate asked them to write a reflective piece. She presented them with excerpts from an essay by Wanda Wuttunee (2003) entitled “We Are More Than Our Problems” and gave them two reflective questions to guide their responses. The student responses disappointed Kate, and she sent me this email after reading their reflections:

Remember the reflection I asked the class to do? It was one of the most disheartening assignments I've read. I couldn't mark it, only read it and give it a check mark. With the exception of 3 students, it was blame the victim. I knew the way I phrased the question would get at that, but I guess I was surprised (after their presentations, especially) that so many would take the easy way out, in terms of critical thinking. I barely talked to them about it. My sister tried to help me out of the “might as well have taught Duncan Campbell Scott the whole time” blues by saying maybe they need to cling harder to their stereotypes when they're first asked to look outside them. Can they just not make the leap from history to now?

In her reflective assignment, Kate asked the students to consider two questions. The first, “Based on your reading of the book your group read, who and/or what is to blame for this ‘newspaper reality’ for Aboriginal people in Canada?” asked the students to consider the statistics connected to media headlines and determine who generated that information and if it was actually a true picture. Most of the responses indicated that the “newspaper reality” was the truth and reflected the reality of most Aboriginals. Kate provided me with 21 student responses, and 16 of the students felt that Aboriginal people were to blame for the “newspaper reality” as illustrated in the following excerpts:

Brandon: A combination of factors from a variety of sources are responsible for these statistics, however the primary responsibility for them rests with the people who they reflect upon. The life that a person chooses to live is a choice and is minimally a result of circumstance.

Andrea: A second example of what is to blame for these newspaper realities is the Aboriginal people themselves. Aboriginals portray themselves as having the white people take everything away from them. They speak about equality throughout mankind, but they still expect to have more rights than others. Aboriginals are fighting for land that was theirs thousands of years ago and when they lose, it is considered racism. When something goes wrong, a lot of Aboriginals do not try and help themselves, but instead they do turn to alcohol or drugs.

Derek: The aboriginals are to blame for living like that because they have been here for years not trying to improve their lives and lifestyles. They complain to the government that they don’t get enough privileges and money for schooling and housing, but a majority of them would drop out of school and wreck their houses.

Curtis: They talk as if they don’t get a fair shot but there are a lot of aboriginal people who have taken advantage of the treaties. Alcohol and drug addictions are what set most of them back. If they sober up and use what they were given they would be a lot more successful.

Calvin: Natives want to be equals in Canada. Well, unfortunately, they aren't. Not because of who and what they are, but because they want treaties, live on welfare, and stuff like that. Until Natives stop quibbling about land issues, get off welfare, give up their treaties, and start actually working and contributing to society, they won't be equal.

Larry: The statistics are true how aboriginals are at greater risk of diseases, suicides and addictions, and the only people they can blame is themselves. Aboriginals receive more free things in life than other citizens, university, housing, jobs. More people should act on these opportunities and not follow the steps of the greater percentage of aboriginals.

Clay: Much of this comes from getting money too easily, like treaty cheques, child welfare cheques, upon others. Giving them money for having children makes them have more of them.

Wayne: If the natives really want to be equal they won't keep asking for these things and they will live like everybody else. Much of the reason people dislike natives is because they get so much free stuff that they probably don't deserve.

Comments such as these illustrated the ingrained prejudices in this community and the “head” and “heart” separation that existed. Although it seemed, during the discussion of the literary works, that the students had reached an intellectual understanding of some of the issues confronting Aboriginal Canadians, their written comments contradicted that perception. The comments concerning treaties and “free stuff” illustrated common misconceptions heard from a large portion of the population. These students, to Kate's credit, felt as if they could speak openly and honestly. They were not telling her what they thought she wanted to hear but what they believed to be true. Their understandings of the situations were built on the “newspaper realities” and the attitudes prevalent in their community. Although we were hopeful that new ways of interpreting Aboriginal literature would change attitudes, one semester was obviously not sufficient to make

long-term changes. What was unfortunate was the way in which these students had normalized racism: they did not see the inappropriateness of their remarks.

However, not all students reiterated the status quo. In the following excerpts, three students indicated their belief that Native people were not solely to blame for their problems. These students did blame the victim but also recognized the agency of others. However, each student implied that individual choice was the most important factor in determining whether or not an Aboriginal person became part of the “newspaper reality”:

Tyson: I think that most of the blame should be directed toward the government. On the other hand, the aboriginal people are also to blame. They get drunk because they drink the alcohol. No one forced them to do it.

Krista: Stereotypes about Aboriginals are a very big concern that is definitely bringing their culture down. For example, my whole life I believed that Aboriginals were the only ones allowed to be on welfare, which is far from true. Prejudice and Racism are also huge factors that effect Aboriginals. A lot of people judge them because they are Native. People have to realize that not all Aboriginals are the same. Some of them just want to be treated normal and they try to make a living like most people do.

Sarah: Problems could have been solved or not even started a long time ago. I don't think you can point fingers at who is to blame for things that just simply evolved over long periods of time. The pro's and con's for white people and aboriginal people in who did what are equal. The white people took the land and made the aboriginals have to start over. In response, the aboriginals don't have to drink and live on welfare now a days.

Interestingly, Sarah earlier identified herself as “Métis, but not really.” Had she revealed more of her own story, it might have been possible to see connections between the decisions that individuals in her family made and those in the “newspaper reality” and Campbell’s autobiography. However, the comments of these three students indicated that they were beginning to see multiple sides to the issues. Whether this questioning existed



prior to the introduction to the lenses and the literature circles cannot be known, but, with continued exposure to the issues, these students may well continue to develop their questioning of the existing stereotypes.

Two students were able to see beyond the “newspaper reality” and identified ways that stereotypes and prejudices were reinforced:

Constance: I think the media is responsible for the “newspaper reality.” Most of the articles they publish are about alcohol and substance abuse, violence and suicide. Because this is all that the media publishes, it causes other Canadians to think of aboriginal people in this way.

Robert: It appears that human nature chooses to expose the negative occurrences in a culture and life while ignoring the positive attributes a minority group has with them. The media is an extremely influential medium aimed to attract attention. We as a society tend to believe the easiest truth displayed (usually negative) and fail to analyze all aspects of the situation. As we all know, when you see something often enough, you will believe it, and in this case the Aboriginal’s identity becomes closer and closer to the identity developed by the media. Therefore we are all to blame for the negative stereotypical image of the aboriginals, with different groups responsible for different times in the past.

Both students had moved beyond unquestioning acceptance of the commonly held beliefs of their peers. They criticized the media’s portrayal of reality and assumed that Canadians believed what they hear and read and do not ask the necessary questions. Robert had also identified ways in which this stereotyping helped to create a “newspaper reality” as Aboriginal people acted in the way they were expected to behave.

The narrowness of the students’ responses to the question was disappointing but may also have been reflective of the phrasing of the question. Although Kate designed the question to provoke with the deliberate use of the phrase “who or what is to blame,”

some students may have interpreted this as a request to assign blame to one group. The responses mirrored societal attitudes and reflected the inability of most students to counter the dominant narrative. The excerpts from Wuttunee's narrative that accompanied the assignment presented Aboriginal realities that countered the "newspaper reality;" the students disregarded these narratives as inconsequential exceptions to the rule.

Kate gave her students this second question to consider: "Again, based on your reading, do you see that Aboriginal people are 'more than their problems'? Explain. In what ways does your book/author hold out hope for change?" She wanted them to look beyond the stereotypes and determine whether or not the stereotypes were the whole picture. The responses to this question continued to illustrate how the students blamed the victims. They seemed, for the most part, unable to separate the individual from the stereotypes, and they viewed the problems as personal rather than societal. They identified positive change with becoming more like the dominant society and did not see value in retaining an Aboriginal identity:

Karen: I believe in my book that Cheryl and April are "more than their problems" because your problems are only as big as you make them. With Cheryl she was always trying to fit in with the Aboriginal crowd and help them with their troubles instead of dealing with her own problems. While April never wanted to admit she was aboriginal because she was ashamed of her race and by being more than her problem. With hiding her race she was also helping to discriminate instead of standing up and proving that out in the world there are good, clean aboriginals who work for their money, don't sleep around and are not alcoholics.

Robert: I believe Maria Campbell's example that positive change is possible, provides this "hope" for change. She has led the way by learning how to change independently (self provoked) along with

support from others. She removed her blanket, and is a better person for it. Now it is our turn to raise the blinding, restricting blanket which limits our lives.

Brandon: When surrounded by hardship it is very common for people both aboriginal and non-aboriginal to attempt to take the easy way out... As seen in the book *"In Search of April Raintree"* by April's example aboriginal people do have the ability to change as long as they also have the desire for change... Since April has been successful in turning her life around she has the ability to give her nephew opportunities that Cheryl and many other Native people are never given. Under April's guidance Henry will very likely live a full and rewarding life. The fact that Henry as a native person will have a normal and safe life gives hope for all Native people.

Derek: All we hear about aboriginals is their problems, so we think there is [no] more to aboriginals than their problems. They are people who have feelings and relationships, they live their lives differently but that is their choice and we shouldn't try to change that. Lots of aboriginals do succeed and crawl out of the hole they get themselves into.

Larry: Some aboriginals live happy successful lives but get no credit in statistics or newspapers. That doesn't mean they should start slowing down and slacking off. Keep it up and word may get spread around and those successful people may become role models to others. It will show people that it doesn't take much to be happy and maybe, slowly aboriginals may show a change.

Wayne: I think natives could be a lot more than just their problems if they actually tried to show it. The ones who are nice are the ones that no one ever hears about. We always hear about the one under the influence that killed someone while driving. Thus the natural stereotype towards them is that they are really just a big problem!

The students' comments illustrated their difficulties understanding the big picture. Their responses seemed contradictory as the students attempted to separate the individual from the collective. They did identify hope as resting in the ability of an individual to change and suggested that the "newspaper reality" obscured their understandings. At this point, however, the students seemed incapable of seeing the big picture, a limitation that caused Kate frustration and despair.

Several weeks after the students had completed their literature circles and shortly before the end of the school term, I returned to Kate's classroom for one last visit. I brought with me plenty of pizza and pop, and we invited the students to enjoy the food and to share their impressions about the research study. It didn't take long for the discussion to centre on students' perceptions of Aboriginal people and how these perceptions had been influenced by personal experiences and the literature study. Üli, a German exchange student, provided an interesting overview of his perceptions and experiences. Before he arrived in Canada, his impressions of Aboriginal people were closely tied to the "Indian clubs" of Germany where the concept of the "noble savage" glorified the past and romanticized the traditions. He drew comparisons between the treatment of Jews during the Holocaust and the historical treatment of Aboriginals as they were moved on to reserves. However, during the time he lived in Canada, he was very much influenced by his peers and now identified reverse discrimination as an issue. He, like many other students in the class, felt Aboriginals did not want equality so much as preferential treatment. He did not understand the role of affirmative action programs in opening access to education and employment for Aboriginal groups. Rather, Üli saw this as preferential treatment that discriminated against hard-working members of the non-Aboriginal society.

Many members of the class who admitted that their attitudes towards Aboriginals were negative and reflected the general attitudes of the larger society reinforced Üli's perceptions. They realized that Aboriginals did not have equal access to opportunities and were willing to admit that changes needed to be made. However, they were concerned that existing processes were not perfect and, as a result, were unfair.

Affirmative action, in their opinion, was certainly one of the unfair processes. Grudgingly, as Kate skillfully guided the discussion, the students conceded that perhaps affirmative action was needed in order to make the serious changes that they saw as necessary: there needed to be education and training for “them” if change was going to happen.

At this point Robert jumped in to the conversation and highlighted the use of “us” and “them” without acknowledging that people “from our cultural background have the same issues.” By identifying the exclusionary language practices, Robert shifted the tone of the conversation as students now began to make connections to the literature they had read, identifying the weight of stereotypes in shaping actions. They were able to see how self-image limits the individual and affects many things, including academic performance. Some students agreed that the characters in their books acted in the way society expected them to act and that these same forces were likely at work in their own community. Again, we had a level of intellectual understanding, but would this lead to action? For Kate the time to act was now, and she was fearful that slow change may be too little too late.

I had given each participating teachers a journal to use as she wished during the research process. Shortly after my last classroom visit, Kate emailed me her journal entries that contained these thoughts about the experience:

*May 24: So I've done my best - not thinking too much - i.e. over-thinking, questioning. Have done what I usually do the way I would usually do it. Gave the kids more choice and freedom - the lit. circles. Thought it had been good. Seemed so from the*

presentations. Then Geraldine suggested some form of evaluation and I gave the reflective writing assignment. Didn't even want to read them, knew what I was going to get from Calvin's comments, Derek's questions/looks. But almost to a person? And from quarters I'd never expect?

I used the word "blame" on purpose. Blame now ranks with revenge - that infamous B30 assignment. Are the three minds that got/get it just able to make the cognitive leap, or more intelligent, or more experienced, more sensitive? It's not that they're saying what they think I want to hear.

So I sunk into the "I might as well have taught Charles G. D. Roberts and Duncan Campbell Scott the whole time" blues. And I exploded at Colin when he said there was no good Canadian literature and it's all Native...

I know why I beat my head against the wall when there's little hope of change, but will there ever be a meeting point? If their attitudes become more entrenched, should I - we - all withdraw?

These questions were central to why we had chosen to do what we were doing. Were the students cognitively able to make the necessary connections and leaps? Would there be a meeting point? Although Kate had her times of despair, she did not give up and continued to look at these issues and ways of expanding the views of her students and her colleagues.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **THE FOURTH LAYER**

#### **In Conversation: II**

##### **Introduction**

On a lovely June day at the end of the school year, Shannon and I made the journey to Kate's community and met her for lunch. Kate and Shannon were relaxed; teaching was done for the year, exams were being written, schools were becoming quiet. Kate, Shannon, and I had concluded the classroom portion of the research; I had visited each of their classrooms on various occasions, they had introduced their students to critical lenses and Aboriginal literature, and they had had the students reflect on their understanding of the literature. Although the school year had not officially ended, the days in the classroom seemed long past as graduation, final exams, and post-secondary plans had become the central focus of students and staff. Now was a good time to reflect on the past semester and to think about the next school year. Over lunch, Shannon, Kate and I shared teacher stories, talked about our families, and discussed vacation plans. The lunch provided a relaxed atmosphere in which Kate and Shannon could reconnect and we could engage in casual conversation before we began the joint conversational interview.

Following lunch, we returned to Kate's classroom for the joint interview because Kate needed to be on site. Since the students were no longer at the school in the afternoons, we had hoped that we would have some quiet uninterrupted time for the conversational interview; however the initial half hour had frequent interruptions. Some students were in the school and needed to check with Kate about their final exams, pick up assignments, or say good-bye. Shannon had done her teaching practicum in this school, and we were interrupted by her former cooperating teacher who wanted to touch base. However, once we dealt with these details, the remainder of the time passed quickly, and Shannon and Kate had a great deal to share. Although Shannon was the more vocal of the two participants, Kate spoke more during this second conversation than she had several months earlier. Both women had met with frustration and were unsure of the ultimate effect the approach had had on their students' interpretive abilities. However, both women felt that they had grown as teachers and had gained confidence in their ability to teach Aboriginal literature. The use of the theoretical lenses had given them new insights into interpreting texts and teaching literature. During the two hours we spent in conversation, Kate and Shannon shared their frustrations, successes, and ideas for the future.

### **Personal Issues**

Kate and Shannon's individual personalities and teaching styles shaped their research experiences. Both women were committed to issues of social justice and saw literature as a means of introducing their students to these issues. Both had hoped to sow seeds of change in their classrooms and saw this study as an opportunity to validate and refine



their approaches to teaching literature. Through the semester we worked together, questions were answered and new questions were generated. Ultimately, the teachers experienced more change than did their students.

### **Teachers as Agents of Change**

The issues that surfaced in the initial interviews and conversations surfaced again during this joint interview. The issue of identity for both women remained central, although the focus shifted as they began to think about how they wanted to be perceived as teachers. During this conversation, Kate did not question whether or not she was “Aboriginal enough” to participate in the study. Shannon made reference to her anxieties surrounding my presence in her classroom, but it was no longer a central issue. Both women were beginning to focus on their present identity as teachers and how they hoped to further develop. While they were reflecting on their experiences in the classroom, they were also thinking about their future as educators and agents of change.

Shannon, often the idealist, viewed decolonization as a mission for the current generation. Shannon grew up in a family that believed in social responsibility. Her parents, both educators and devoutly Catholic, instilled these values in their children. Shannon’s experiences in her home and in her travels had exposed her to a variety of social issues, and she had developed a strong sense of social responsibility. Although her idealism often led to disappointment because others did not live up to her expectations, it also fuelled her passion and kept her motivated. Shannon also acknowledged her place of

privilege and attempted to make others aware of the unearned advantages from which they benefitted:

I'm a white woman in a rich country, but I'm also a member of the human race, and I have aspirations for it that I share with the young woman from Africa that I took to the debate nationals. Maybe the fact that these departments [postcolonialism] and areas of scholarship are burgeoning right now is because this is our task, our generation's task to move to postcolonial understandings of identity and the world.

Shannon felt that although the philosophical base of Catholic education supported her attitudes toward social justice, not all administrators, teachers, and students in Catholic schools saw social change as their responsibility. Kate, as committed to social justice as Shannon, saw the same attitudes reflected in the public system. Both systems struggled with imparting strong societal values to the students, but the Catholic system could be more overt in its teachings. Both women saw values-based courses as playing an important role in raising student awareness but did not see them as a solution because students were exposed to so many other attitudes and values. Although no one would dispute the need for social justice, they felt very few people were willing to work toward it:

**Shannon:** I asked one of my kids who seems the most social-justice oriented what he wants to do with his life and he said he wants to be a stinking rich eccentric working in automobile design, so there's obviously more powerful forces working on him than his English teacher.

**Kate:** And you see it on the staff level and you see it on the student level - I mean people know you have her for English, you're going to be talking about this, you can't say anything: she'll say no homophobic comments, no hetero-sexism here, so the kids who like the class best are the kids right there who are with that, who have similar values.

Both Kate and Shannon felt that they had been pigeonholed as the social reformers in their schools. This was both a validating and an alienating classification. Because they were passionate about the need for social change and saw their classrooms as places that could introduce students to these ideas, the fact that other staff recognized their passions was validating. However, this role became alienating because they felt that they were always moving against the grain and were met with resistance in their classrooms and staffrooms.

Neither Shannon nor Kate saw students able to make consistent connections between their classroom discussions and their community experiences. Both women struggled with this intransigence. Kate was determined to keep on teaching in this way, as much for her sake as for her students: “So how do we heighten awareness in the common ground? I’ll keep teaching this stuff, but somehow I’ve got to not expect that somehow they’re going to make the connections.” Shannon, on the other hand, attempted to intellectualize what happened in the classroom:

They still have this attitude that we’re tourists of the world, and so when a postcolonial writer acts as a tourist on their turf, I’m not even sure how much of it actually registers – they’re so used to having definitions of reality that privilege them that it’s hard for them to think of other writers in marginalized positions having any kind of power.

Shannon often drew on a Leonard Cohen song as her metaphor, a song that states “There’s a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in.” She hoped that her teaching exposed some of those cracks in the current social structure and allowed light or knowing to enter students’ minds. At the conclusion of this project, she was more convinced that

working toward social justice was her mission, and both teachers had come to realize that change would be slow:

**Shannon:** It took a long time for them to learn those attitudes and it's going to take a long time to unlearn them.

**Kate:** Maybe what they've thought all along is shaken a little bit, maybe the grade 12s are all the more defensive, and I hope that's what I'm seeing.

Perhaps the work Kate and Shannon had done in their classrooms had created some cracks through which the light could now get in.

### **A Counterbalance to the Dominant Narrative**

Theorists who advocate the use of multicultural literatures contend that exposure to diverse narratives provides a counterbalance to the dominant narrative. I had hoped that the study of Aboriginal literature would expose and unsettle students' perceptions of Aboriginals in our society. Although this intention was primarily focused on the students in the two grade 12 classrooms, the two participating teachers were also forced to look at their perceptions. Shannon commented on her growing awareness of the Aboriginals in her school while Kate played the devil's advocate by raising questions commonly raised by the general population. Shannon wanted her students to look at the images of Aboriginals that were prevalent in society and the media. Drawing upon social Darwinian theory, she made connections between survival of the fittest and racism. By exposing these connections, Shannon hoped that the students would identify the existing contradictions in their experiences:

**Shannon:** And so the students and I just looked at a couple things and threw together the images of the Indian that these native writers had called attention to. So that the thing about these

images is that they're frozen, they're fixed in time, and they suggest that this is a people that not only didn't adapt but is not capable of adapting, therefore are doomed to extinction.

It's really awkward in our school right now because our computer tech who keeps all our computers running, his last name is Sunchild, and he has a big braid running down his back, and he's the computer guru; it's like a total oxymoron for the students that you would have a computer wizard who is Indian because their idea is that, "My god, they're lucky if they graduate from high school, they can't adapt."

**Kate:** But they'll then say, "that's one guy, look how he made it, why can't the others?"

**Shannon:** Probably, but there's two Native staff in our school right now who command respect.

**Kate:** Yeah, but there's Stonechild<sup>16</sup>.

Shannon obviously hoped that these positive role models in her school would counter the numerous negative associations students and staff were exposed to. Kate was less optimistic. Her experiences led her to believe that the negative encounters far outweighed the positive. In fact, people used the Aboriginals who were successful in a Eurocentric context as justification for further marginalizing those whom they saw as unsuccessful. This enabled the dominant culture to continue to abrogate responsibility for the systemic racism that existed in the communities.

## **Student Issues**

In our first joint conversational interview, Kate and Shannon had identified concerns that they felt might be stumbling blocks to the success of the research. Both teachers had hoped that participation in this project would have brought about changes in their

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<sup>16</sup> Neil Stonechild was one of several Aboriginal men whose frozen bodies were found on the outskirts of Saskatoon in the early 1990s. Saskatoon police officers have been implicated in his death.

students' attitudes and perceptions. During the individual interviews conducted during the course of the research, Shannon and Kate had expressed their frustration when the changes were not obvious or rapid. The prevailing attitudes were entrenched, and students seemed to have difficulty recognizing their prejudices or seeing a need for personal change.

### **Understanding Systemic Racism**

Although the students' attitudes toward all visible minorities were imbued with racism, their feelings toward Aboriginals were especially prejudicial. Students in both schools had some exposure to non-Aboriginal visible minorities, but their encounters were limited. In Shannon's school, many of the visible minority students were the children of immigrants who were well situated financially. Their parents were either professionals or intent on guaranteeing their children access to post-secondary education and willing to make the sacrifices necessary. Because few visible Aboriginals attended her school, the students had had limited encounters with those they knew to be Aboriginals. In spite of this, they held many of the same assumptions that Kate's students expressed:

They take more of, what do you call it, an essentialist argument that Natives experience violence because they're violent, and I am safe because I'm a person of good character. What's that called, attribution theory, where the behaviour stems from something essential in the person rather than as a reflection of the social structures that we've created, like an inevitable consequence.

As a strategy, Shannon saw the use of resource people as having potential. She had had an Aboriginal woman who worked for Corrections Canada in her classroom and was amazed at the positive response given by her students:

She came to my class and you could have heard a pin drop the entire hour. You know why I think it was? I don't think they'd been in the room with an Indian woman before. Contrary to what I expected, they showed immediate respect. She hardly moved, she spoke in a practical monotone, but she had these real life justice stories about Indian people from different parts of the country, and they had ultimate respect.

Shannon and Kate agreed that bringing in more resource people would be beneficial. As Shannon noted, students needed experiences that involved emotional as well as intellectual responses:

They need to be in a place where they can't run away, they can't hide and they can experience the full humanity of a person. So I think they need to be in close quarters with powerful representatives of Native culture who get in their face about it.

Both women saw increased exposure to Aboriginals with a variety of experiences as one way of bridging the head-heart disconnect, a disconnect they felt seriously impaired students' understanding of systemic racism.

### **Theoretical Issues**

Over the course of the semester, Shannon and Kate had grappled with the theoretical underpinnings of their discipline in new ways. Although they always understood that concepts of canon and literary theory had a place in the conception of English as a school subject, this research study required them to pay closer attention to their own understandings.

### **New Resources**

Kate and Shannon were enthusiastic about the grade 12 English curriculum. They loved Canadian literature, enjoyed reading a diversity of authors, and looked for literature that would appeal to their students and extend their thinking. As they became more involved

in the study, Kate and Shannon looked for new resources, and, in the process, they also became more aware of the biases of their colleagues:

**Kate:** Well, when I came back from the first meeting and I told one of my colleagues, he said, "Yeah, well, it's all just gloom and doom and pity me. Of course I haven't read anything since..." He was on the curriculum committee, but hasn't read anything since. There's kind of been some stuff written since.

Shannon and Kate considered how to share their understandings with their colleagues. Although they contemplated discussing their involvement in this research with their colleagues in noon hour seminars or during departmental meetings, they did not. Perhaps the casual staffroom conversations had been enough to deter them from attempting to change the perceptions of their fellow teachers.

### **Interpreting Through Critical Lenses**

Using literary criticism as an interpretive lens for teaching literature was a new concept for both Shannon and Kate. Although both were familiar with literary theory, they had never used theoretical terms in their classrooms and initially had been unsure how to proceed. I had introduced the metaphor of a lens, and Kate had been quite deliberate in her use of this metaphor when introducing literary theory to her students. I asked Kate and Shannon to consider how they might have done things differently. Kate felt that her students had benefited from this approach and had been able to use the metaphor of the lens to further their own interpretive skills:

You could see by the end of the semester that most kids had glommed on to that, the lens, right. Things that I should have done, you know, we had the class with the theories that we referred to a bit, but I would make it more explicit, more upfront, just that, I love the theory but I didn't know it. It was more helpful than I thought initially.



Shannon had grown more comfortable with the lens approach and was more cognizant of the lenses she used when interpreting literature. Through the course of the study, she saw many connections between the responses her students had to literary interpretations through postcolonial and Aboriginal lenses and the responses Verna St. Denis and Carol Schick (2003) described Education students giving in cross-cultural and anti-racist courses. Shannon felt that she needed more information so she would know what to expect from her students. She felt that students had predictable responses when their comfort zones were challenged, and teachers needed to have strategies to deal with those responses:

I'm thinking for some of this to really work, we need simulations. They need to experience not having the privileges they take for granted, they have to experience something, it can't just be up here [indicates head].

Making the “head-heart” connection had been the elusive strand throughout this study. How could we get students to internalize those things that they intellectualized in a way that brought about change? Kate was not as convinced that simulations would make the difference:

I just haven't seen enough to see if the links get made. I feel very, very bleak about kids making the links at all unless there's some predisposition or unless they're very, very bright, and not all the bright kids made those links.

Kate's experience with the reflections following the literature circles had discouraged her. The majority of the students had been unable to make the links between what they understood from the texts, and what they understood in their own community. She noted that the most important factor seemed to be a predisposition toward social justice, a

predisposition that had drawn her and Shannon into the study. This predisposition toward social justice issues had made Shannon and Kate ideal participants in this study and had been part of their motivation to become involved. Their analysis of their peers also indicated that those teachers who were interested in social justice were also the teachers most likely to introduce postcolonial issues and include Aboriginal literature. Students who were involved in social justice issues were also more likely to become positive participants in the class and provide the counterbalance to those students who resisted change.

### **Viewing the Margins**

Most of the students who resisted change were unaware of the relationships between the centre and the margins. Postcolonial criticism draws attention to those relationships. Kate and Shannon indicated that grade 12 was possibly too late to begin introducing these ideas because students were reluctant to embrace change:

**Shannon:** So then rather than discussing the literature and how these writers are using the English language to revisit the English language and assumptions and using techniques with reversals to claim the centre, we're talking about whether a Native person can write, and so the two ways that I was able to climb out of that a little bit was instead to start talking about cultural contact and that new art forms emerge with cultural contact that are hybrids of the two – so talking about hybridity and the irony and contradictions of each culture being revealed when two cultures came together. That helped get us on to ground where we were doing some actual analysis because they don't want to get rid of their racist ideas – that would threaten them; that would be a death of sorts to them. When I taught it to my grade 10s, they unpacked it beautifully, simply, cleanly, so I think that we should start, you know, preferably grade 6. Just getting the idea that there's really good literature written in all parts of the world, and it's different depending on the culture and the intentions of the writer.

Both teachers felt positively about the power of postcolonial interpretations to bring new insights into texts and offer different ways of viewing marginalized groups. Both teachers felt strongly that grade 12 was too late to introduce these lenses. Using the lens approach with their grade 9 and 10 students had worked well. These groups were more open to a diversity of interpretations and not as entrenched in their belief systems. Neither teacher felt that an approach through literary theory was too difficult for younger students and felt it could be tailored to suit a variety of classroom contexts.

### **Valuing Aboriginal Perspectives**

The students often saw the desire of Aboriginal groups to reclaim and maintain culture as an inability to amalgamate, a desire to remain on the margins rather than to move toward the centre. We had hoped that the introduction of Aboriginal literary theory would enable students to see the values inherent in Aboriginal culture. By reading with an understanding of Aboriginal values, the students had had the opportunity to be less judgmental and to modify their own perceptions. Although both Kate and Shannon were frustrated with the narrow-mindedness of their students, the introduction of the Aboriginal lens encouraged the teachers to engage in these conversations with each other, their students, and their colleagues. Kate had initially planned to include a section on Aboriginal literature; participation in the study caused Shannon to include more than she would have otherwise.

For Shannon, the key issue remained the students' inability to see the mastery of language as the Aboriginal authors reinvented the language and made it their own.

Shannon's experiences illustrated the students' frustrations, not only with the language, but also with the literary style and the unfamiliar metaphors:

Their statement just two minutes previous had been, "Well that essay 'Playing with Girls is a Sin' that's just bad writing." "Why is it bad writing?" Well, because it's not plot driven as you're used to. We read "Damn" by Ipellie, and it's got this thing about the northern lights playing ball with people's heads, and this student said, "Well that simile just doesn't work. I just totally broke my suspension of disbelief. That's a bad simile." And you can just tell, they've got this idea, these are an ill-educated people – it's like giving a gun to a baby, they probably shouldn't be handling English in the first place.

Shannon was frustrated as students who seemed to understand postcolonialism were unable to appreciate this literature and were unwilling to attempt interpretations beyond concluding that it was bad literature. The students, well versed in the school canon and standard English, came to Shannon's classroom without the tools needed to appreciate this literature; one semester was not enough to change their entrenched attitudes.

## **Future Plans**

Participating in this study had given Shannon and Kate access to new tools to add to their repertoire of teaching strategies. It had also validated their efforts at introducing their students to postcolonial and Aboriginal literature. They had drawn on my expertise to extend their own knowledge and felt that the opportunity this study had given them enabled them to learn how to teach Aboriginal literature with integrity. We concluded this conversation with a discussion of what had been accomplished and where we might go next.

Both women were frustrated by the lack of movement they saw in their students. They were surprised at how firmly entrenched the racism and prejudices held by their students were and wondered how to counter those. However, both Kate and Shannon also came to realize that not all people have had a diversity of experiences and countering seventeen years of indoctrination to one set of beliefs is not possible in one semester:

**Shannon:** Really, so you know what I think it comes down to then? It just makes me feel all the more that this is the job of us right now in history as teachers.

**Kate:** Yeah, so I guess the critical mass is the thing to keep in mind, that it won't be to a person... that it won't be to a student.

When they looked back on their classes, having had some distance from the experience, they could see that the students were not at the same place they had been in February. Although none of the students had made huge strides from one world view to another, cracks had appeared and they were asking questions. The teachers also had hoped that the seeds they had sown would bear fruit in later years – that the students would not stop asking questions and would continue to make connections between what they had experienced in this class and the things they saw playing out in their lives. Shannon and Kate knew that not all students would make the changes. Kate and Shannon knew that they might never see the changes, but they had to believe that change would happen. Looking back, both were able to articulate the beginnings of change:

**Kate:** Because then I had those responses, novel responses, right, and there was a little bit of movement...

**Geraldine:** And I thought the whole conversation in the class... they started off pretty staunchly – this is their ground – and some of them moved and some didn't, and some of them have already moved, are verbalizing a big movement.

**Kate:** And really, I have another teacher here who says, Kate, work with it. They've lived here; most of them, this is all they know; I don't want to excuse them, but I have to remember too how old the feelings are...

**Geraldine:** And maybe that's what we're doing, planting seeds. People might joke about being politically correct, but in what ways has our vocabulary changed because there's been an emphasis on political correctness? So maybe it doesn't shift the ideology of the people who are learning to be politically correct because they're chastised if they aren't, but it does shift the realities of the people who are hearing politically correct language.

Shannon and Kate recognized their idealism, and I, too, realized that I had been hoping for radical change. Two teachers and one course could not bring about radical change in a population. There were too many other factors influencing the lives of these students, and while we did what we could to introduce new ways of looking at literature, it was only one of a multitude of ideas and situations in the lives of these students. We could not altogether counter the influence of their parents, peers, community, and previous experiences with English. But we could try to create a crack to let the light in.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **THE FIFTH LAYER**

#### **Looking Back**

##### **Introduction**

With the end of the school year came the end of my involvement in Kate's and Shannon's classrooms. However, I was interested in learning how the research had impacted their planning and teaching for the next school year because looking back on past events often provides clarity and new insights. I met Kate and Shannon individually several months after the classroom research ended for a final conversational interview. Each teacher had reflected on her involvement in this research project and now articulated how she gained new understandings, the impact these understandings had on her current classroom situation, and the implications of the research.

## Kate's Final Reflections

Kate's reflection on her practice took two forms: she had provided me with her journal reflections, and we met for one final afternoon of conversation in early December, five months after our second joint conversational interview.

Kate's explanation of her journal entries connected the research with the reality of her classroom. She saw an urgent need for change in her school; the traditional way of doing things was no longer sufficient and was detrimental to the entire student population. Students of Aboriginal ancestry were further marginalized and students from the dominant culture were not given the skills to recognize their complicity in the marginalization or to change the status quo. Kate's concern and frustration were obvious:

I sent you three entries just as they were written, dashes and all, but maybe I should have given them some context. When I started this, my biggest worry was that I wasn't "Aboriginal enough". Then Shannon walked into the restaurant. Guessed I'd do. Then the worry was that this was all going to be academic, that is, interesting, the kind of thing I love - theory and all of that, but how would it speak to the problem in my classes, my school? Connor, who was just trying to get to school everyday in one piece. Kyle, who is smart, but so busy being tough, he can't be penetrated. It's that metaphor we had in sociology about the theorist at the mouth of the river, just trying to change the flow, stop the flooding, while the social workers were downriver, pulling out the bodies one at a time before they all drowned. I'm with the bodies now. I know their faces. I don't fall into the general distrust of academia my teaching colleagues have, but I know where they get it. And I want to make a difference of course. But if my white privileged students leave all of that with their attitudes even more



entrenched, and me and the four kids who get it are just confirmed in our ideas, what has that done?

So after the first trio visit, Marta recommended I read *Book of Jessica*. Well, I'm no Maria Campbell, and maybe that's part of the problem. I don't even know what pronoun to use in these discussions (am I, we, or they?). But Connor and Kyle need change now, and I don't know how long this teaching the other lenses will take. So do we separate, Balkanize? Where is the meeting ground? Will talking to other academics and educators help, or is everyone so entrenched in their positions that it doesn't matter? Because that's what's really scary.

Kate's fears shaped her teaching. Because the Connors and Kyles of her school confided in her, she understood that the need for change was urgent. Her concern, identified in one of our earliest conversations, was that there wouldn't be a significant Aboriginal population if change did not come more rapidly. Kate saw the despair, the suicides, the retreat into addictions and struggled to make a difference. And of course, tied into all these things, was the shaping of identity: Kate's identity as a teacher, as a Métis woman, as a Métis teacher, and the identity of her students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

During the time I worked with Kate, I watched her struggle with her role as a Métis educator, her role as an educator, and her role as a member of society. Kate had a very strong sense of social justice, shaped in part by her experiences as she worked to understand the Métis community from which she had always been isolated. Her insider/outsider position was both a strength and a weakness. Not knowing whether she was part of "us or them" meant that she was often unsure of her position in the school and the community. She felt that her Aboriginal identity was important to school administrators when they needed to bolster their statistics concerning Aboriginal

employees; when she pushed for change, she sensed that the administration would prefer her to remain part of the dominant culture. The students also recognized her in-between position. Some troubled Aboriginal students sought her out as a confidante and mentor while other students approached her to assist them in starting a gay-straight alliance in the school. By this final interview, Kate seemed to have gained confidence in who she was and was able to clearly articulate ways that she hoped to bring about change in her school.

Kate's earlier concern regarding her Aboriginality frequently resurfaced during our conversations as Kate contemplated her various experiences. Because the research had been funded through the Stirling McDowell Foundation, we had been asked to present at their annual conference. In our final conversational interview, Kate recalled the response of an Aboriginal educator who was part of our audience:

Like with the conference and the woman that made me feel like an impostor - an impostor academically speaking and an impostor Aboriginally speaking - and in that strange moment when you and Angela Ward have to tell her that I'm Aboriginal - that I'm of Aboriginal ancestry.

Her point was try it with Aboriginal students and an Aboriginal teacher, right? And you answered well how things had transpired, but I did think that I had mentioned something about, yes I had, I do remember that I'd mentioned something about being of Aboriginal ancestry. I just felt taken to task for being too white, or, anyway...

And then it gets back to the whole shame thing; you know, why our mom denied her whole self so we could have all these chances, so I'm not now trying to reclaim that to advantage myself or if I am then that would be a terrible thing.

Kate's concern with her Aboriginality or lack of it was a recurring issue and one to which she gave a great deal of thought. I believe that her involvement in this research helped her frame her concerns in new ways. Kate was pulled in two directions when she considered her position. On one hand, Kate wanted her daughter to have a better sense of self than she had had, and she wanted to act as a role model and mentor for students of Aboriginal heritage. On the other hand, she was concerned that her separation from the Métis community positioned her as an outsider to that community and her desire to reclaim her heritage would be seen as a money grab. Kate's involvement in this research caused her to reflect on her position and to engage in conversation with me, her family, and her peers about these issues. Her experiences with Aboriginal literature and her daughter's schooling led her to feel more confident about her status and to seriously consider applying for Métis membership:

I think I've decided I want to apply for membership, something to prove that I'm Métis and not for any other reason than - you know "It Crosses My Mind," Marilyn Dumont's poem, about how the next generation and the next generation... who are they going to be and what are they going to call themselves? It started me thinking about - they're doing their research at school and Genevieve sees all these girls who say they are Métis, and she knows about all the research and stuff into her own family - and I'm thinking, yeah you are, but what have we done, what have we done to acknowledge that?

At the same time, Kate was still concerned about the perceptions of her non-Aboriginal students, wanting them to broaden their perspectives rather than becoming more entrenched in their thinking. She feared that disclosing her heritage would silence students, preventing important conversations from ever happening. Her past experiences had shown her that students from the dominant culture were reluctant to express their

opinions when they discovered that she was Aboriginal. Kate was convinced that unexpressed opinions could not be countered and would lead to further entrenchment of racist thinking. When I asked Kate to talk about her experiences, she described an incident that led her to question her position:

And then these questions that came up from the students in class, the white boys, when the one kid in that A30 class wanted to express his opinion, but first said, "Are you Métis?" and then kind of curtailed what he was going say. So that - I don't know what; it's very tangled. I started not saying any more about myself because I didn't want them to just be saying what they thought I wanted them to say. I had the curious feeling of wanting to identify more closely, yet not wanting them to know. You know I told you a few years ago I would have brought in - I remember this one class, I actually brought in - we were going to do "Four Songs for the Fifth Generation" - and I brought in the remnants of a brick from my great-grandmother's residential school. It was a motivational set, something concrete to look at, reflect on the experience, and I wouldn't walk into this A30 with these white boys and do that, I don't think. I can just see them rolling their eyes and thinking, "OK, that's all she's going to talk about." So the experience - you know the literature we read in class, reading your stuff and the theory and so on, wanting to identify more closely and trying to work out negotiating that identity with the kids so that they didn't turn me off or label me.

Kate's experience illustrated the changes she perceived in her school when she talked about the "whitening" of her classroom. These changes significantly impacted Kate's teaching and caused her to question her identity. Although her involvement in this research did not solve her dilemma, it gave her new resolve to look for solutions. The "whitening" of the regular classrooms was not reflective of the demographics of the

school, and Kate was searching for ways to ensure the inclusion of the growing number of Aboriginal secondary students. Kate was concerned that the successes of Aboriginal students were not recognized and that they were not provided with models of success. Kate was looking for ways to provide success stories and expose all students to different images of Aboriginals and thought the graduation exercises might be an appropriate venue:

You know what I've been thinking the last couple of days? I'm in charge of the grad speeches, and a few years ago the person in charge of grad decided that the students would no longer choose their guest speaker, but the committee would give the speaker to them as a gift. Anyway I was thinking that would be a great vehicle. The first time I sat at grad, I was thinking, where are the Aboriginal people here? Now that the Northern Lights program goes to grade twelve, there's going to be more and more, there's going to be more numbers. I mean there's only three in a graduating class of 100s, but wouldn't that be great to have a speaker up there who is just as successful as every other White person we have up there. That's my plan for this year.

Kate was determined to bring in Aboriginal stories and storytellers, to keep talking about the issues, and to continue questioning her role and her responsibility. She knew that not all her colleagues would receive her ideas enthusiastically but recognized the need for a paradigm shift. She was not yet sure how she was going to bring this about and whether or not she would have the courage to identify herself as a Métis or to bring in an Aboriginal graduation speaker. She did know that she would continue to advocate for the students who wanted to start the gay-straight alliance and that she would continue looking for ways to support Aboriginal students in the regular classroom and challenge dominant culture students to question their attitudes and perceptions.

Kate recognized the need to continually challenge the students and introducing Aboriginal literature was one way to do this. However, Kate was not fully prepared for the student responses to the issues that surfaced in discussions of the literature. Although she had been aware of the imbedded prejudices in the non-Aboriginal community, she was unprepared for the students' staunch adherence to these misconceptions. Six months after the hurtful responses to the "newspaper reality" assignment, Kate was still struggling with a sense of futility.

This adherence to previous ways of seeing the world had surfaced in several of Kate's classes and became obvious in the contradictory responses students presented in the grade twelve English class. Although they were able to discuss the literary works with some degree of empathy and understanding, they reverted to their former assumptions when asked to make connections to personal experience. Kate now saw the same thing happening in her current grade nine classroom:

They know the right answer - and we see it even in grade nine where we're teaching bullying - and they know the right answers before you even start the component. We just finished this long book in grade nine about what a terrible thing prejudice and social victimization are, and these girls are saying I can't wait to see so and so fight. That would be a great fight, and she could have gotten 98% on that whole unit. So they really know the right answers now, but are they going to hide behind those even more? I don't want to go back to the grandparents who spoke like they did about groups of people so they know what tent to hide their racism in; I don't want to go back to that, but it's just getting more slippery.

Watching the students mouth all the right platitudes in class but not transfer any of this information to their actions frustrated Kate and caused her to question the effectiveness

of what she was doing in the classroom. However, looking back on her frustrating experiences of the previous semester caused her to remember her experiences as an education student; she remembered seeing the same resistant behaviours among the adult learners in that setting. She, like all other education majors in Saskatchewan during the last decade, had been required to take a course in anti-racist thought and education. When Kate reflected on that experience, she realized that well educated adults with a diversity of life experiences also had difficulty changing their attitudes:

**Kate:** I don't know, does time do it? Like in terms of generations, not semesters.

**Geraldine:** Part of me wants to say, "Do we have time?" and another part of me says, "We have nothing but time."

**Kate:** And it's just going to be in their face as the population increases. And that's probably a big part of the fear. Especially when the *StarPhoenix* reports that in however many years, 50%...

The students in Kate's classroom had uninformed opinions about various population groups including recent immigrants from Asia and Africa. However, because these population groups were small and worked hard to achieve financial independence and success, they were not viewed with the same derision as members of the Aboriginal community.

Kate saw her English classroom as one locale for fighting this battle against racism. Although she was sometimes reluctant to disclose her ancestry, she was also beginning to feel that it was important to be known as an Aboriginal educator. She was uncomfortable dealing with the questions concerning Aboriginal access to free education and the

assumption that the only reason she would teach Aboriginal literature was her personal connection to the topic. However, she was beginning to see herself as an activist and role model, convinced that she had a responsibility to speak out and initiate change. In describing an encounter with a student, Kate spoke with conviction and assurance, clearly seeing the underlying issues:

Just a couple of days ago, in the library, this grade twelve student that I had in media studies, came up to me and asked, "like what are you teaching? And like, last semester I had A30, and we had to do this Aboriginal poetry." He doesn't know his audience. And again, he's one of those nice, white, male, hockey players. Like he would never have said that if he had to do a lot of Saskatchewan stuff, or maybe he would, so he was the link - know who I am mister, who you're talking to - but also to those students that we had in the class during this study. We can complain about that which is such a - when did they ever study Aboriginal literature before and it's such a little bit - and you realize it's not the literature, it's all the other baggage that comes with it in their lives.

Even though Kate had been very frustrated and discouraged at the end of the research study, she was still optimistic that students could shed their baggage, and, at some point in time, new attitudes would prevail. However, she also realized that it would require more than an hour a day in a five-month semester to make a difference.

I had hoped that the introduction of critical theory would help to change attitudes and make a difference in students' understandings of Aboriginal literature and the broader issues raised through studying the literature. Although I had surmised that the introduction of critical theory would give the students new interpretive strategies, it proved to be more beneficial for Kate than the students. Through her involvement in the



research study, Kate was validated in her literature choices and given new interpretive strategies to share with her students. Kate felt empowered to make changes in her classroom and felt supported in her efforts to implement the new Saskatchewan curriculum. She also became more aware that many of her teaching colleagues were resistant to change.

The literature various teachers choose for inclusion in their courses of study illustrates the resistance to change. Kate recognized that the younger teachers, those newer to the profession, were most likely to introduce Aboriginal literature in their classrooms. Kate also realized that the teachers were in as much need of rethinking their preconceptions as the students:

So the teacher that the student was complaining about when he said he wished he would have had me - because I guess there'd be no Aboriginal literature in A30 - is similar-minded and younger, not that young, but newer to teaching. I don't know if there would be anyone else in our department who - no one else unless they're in the Northern Lights program has used *Halfbreed*.

There needs to be new blood before there'll be that kind of change. There are people that I think I like, who are like-minded in the department, who say, "I just won't do it." That's the thing; it's really not that much different than what we're trying to do with the students, except that they're older.

Kate was convinced that one of the reasons teachers were resistant to change was that they did not see Aboriginal students in their classrooms. Because the majority of Aboriginal students were in the Northern Lights program, teachers in the regular program felt that Aboriginal issues would be dealt with in that context: "I think they'll [teachers]

be more inclined to think they'll [Northern Lights teachers] take care of it because 'those kids [Aboriginal] aren't even in my class right now.'" Kate felt that the other teachers were unaware of the need to expose all students to a diversity of literatures including works coming from Aboriginal voices. These attitudes shaped literature selections in all courses, not just the grade twelve Canadian literature course.

Although one semester of grade twelve English focused on Canadian literature, the other semester was world literature. Kate felt that this was an opportunity to explore a diversity of literary traditions, and her approach to teaching this course had become more postcolonial because of her involvement in the research project:

I used the poem "The Stranglehold of English Lit" right before we started *Hamlet*. And we didn't do tons of it, but I'm pretty sure they got the point. You know, I asked the question about why do we study this, not in terms of ideals and the study of human nature, but why with all the plays written do we study this one. Today they're preparing their formal essay, and they talked about standard English and it's not the only English. We didn't get into it as much as we could have, but I did remember what you said about, in a given situation, the language of power, and trying to get them to see that. So I think out of this experience, I'm trying to get that picture more.

Kate had become more conscious of the values embedded in the choice of literature, particularly in the traditional school canon. She encouraged her students to question the choice of literature and to consider the reasons for those choices. Kate had become much more deliberate in exposing her students to her own concerns about the value of specific texts. By introducing students to the use of literary theory, Kate hoped that they would

be able to interpret texts through other lenses and raise their own questions concerning the value of a text.

A central goal of this research project was to introduce students to literary theory and encourage them to read through those lenses. Although the focus of the study was on Aboriginal literature and postcolonial and Aboriginal critical theories, Kate introduced the students to a broader spectrum of lenses and encouraged them to use those lenses to interpret all literature. During our final interview, Kate reflected on her experience and considered ways that she might have acted differently:

As I was listening to Shannon talk about kind of a more systematic way that she led up to certain ideas, I could probably do that. I think I too often think they're with me when they're not there - just in terms of their thinking, they're not necessarily there yet, so being a bit more explicit and systematic - I mean we had done, you know, other voices and marginalized voices and we've even done the same pieces a few times, like "Pretty Like a White Boy" and so on, but some more effort, maybe like I do with the grade 10s, doing the "brown eyes, blue eyes" thing and simulations like that to try and get them in that spot, in that position before we start reading. I always think, nah, they've done that to death; they've had the units in grade 10, and they've had it in Socials. So I haven't answered that, but that's one thing I could do.

Kate had assumed that the students would be able to transfer their understandings from one situation to another, and, when they had been unable to recognize the issues identified in the literature in the realities of their community, Kate was frustrated and disappointed. Simulations might have fostered more empathy in the students, and more

empathy might have enabled them to see the connections between their interpretations of the literature and the issues in the community.

Kate saw the interpretive lenses as a positive addition to her classroom and of interest to the students. By using the lenses, students were able to develop at least one interpretation, and the academically advanced students saw how several interpretations of the same literary piece could be possible. When Kate introduced the lenses to her students, that she used these lenses to interpret literature became obvious to them, thereby removing some of the mystery surrounding the search for meaning in a text. Kate was confident in her understanding of all but Aboriginal literary theory and was considering ways to connect the theoretical and the practical aspects of that interpretive lens:

And things to improve upon: in terms of the theory itself, maybe bring in a writer or resource person, someone who's important in the theory community itself, and I'm not really in the community. I mean they read *Halfbreed*, and they read about what she was trying to do - a bridging of practice and reading literature and theory and everything - but that's something else. I'm not sure right now, but for them to see that kind of theory in practice.

Kate felt that her students would have had a better understanding of Campbell's manipulation of language if they had had the opportunity to talk with the author. Campbell's *Stories of the Road Allowance People* would be an ideal starting point for that conversation, and Kate was considering including it in the future.

Kate's choice of literature was determined by a limited budget and the existing book room collection. Kate had advocated for the purchase of more Aboriginal literature and

had been able to acquire a class set of one new work most years. The teachers in the Northern Lights program also used the literature by Aboriginal authors and helped provide a critical mass to advocate change. Kate would like to expand the school's collection:

And then, in terms of choice of literature, as much as I don't want to sound as if I'm always complaining, I think I did okay in A30 by giving them those options, but I keep looking at the Thomas Kings and everyone. I don't know how to say it, but the writers who - it's the total picture - who use humour and everything else, to show these kids it's not just about the headlines in the newspapers. I think, in terms of choice of literature, showing them that they're people too. I mean there's this history that's always going to be there in the literature I choose. To try to get them to see that there's humour too, and there's light, and there's wonderful traditions in other parts of life; it's not all whining and complaining. Now we're out of money in our department.

Money was one limiting factor in Kate's quest to purchase new resources, but she also had to contend with the skepticism of her peers who did not see literary value in the works. They tended to focus on the issues and felt that they were passé, and it was time to move on. Ironically, they did not recognize the limited access to funding as a contributing factor in Kate's use of "those old things."

Kate had obviously been thinking about her experiences during the research study and was now considering the ways she could bring her new understandings into her classroom. At the time of our final interview, Kate was beginning to plan for the second semester Canadian literature course:

So I'm coming up to A30 next semester and it will be interesting to compare in my mind how things go. The things that we did will be present in the classroom, more than they would have been before, and I'm still trying to - if not, here's the two pages of theories - consciously be explicit about the things that maybe I wasn't explicit about before.

Her involvement in the research had made Kate more cognizant of her own practice and had given her opportunity and encouragement to try new things. Kate was looking for new ways to present the issues to the students and counter the misconceptions and prejudices she felt were prevalent in the community. She now hoped to continue incorporating the new approaches we had worked with and to encourage other teachers to consider expanding their practice. She felt that the research had increased interest among some of her peers. Although the interested teachers remained a small group and represented those people already using Aboriginal literature, the hope for change was there.

### **Shannon's Final Reflections**

When I met with Shannon for coffee in October, the year after our research, she as usual, was eager to talk about what was happening in her classroom. Shannon, having obviously given a great deal of thought to her experiences the previous semester, continued to search for ways to bring social justice issues into her classroom. She was eager to begin, bursting with stories, launching into descriptions of classroom activities as soon as we sat down. Through her involvement in the research project, Shannon had had the opportunity to grapple with new ideas and new ways of presenting issues to her

students. She loved to be intellectually stimulated, and involvement in this project had energized her because she had been continually challenged to expand her understandings.

Shannon was an interesting study in contrasts. On the one hand, she exuded confidence as she told stories about classroom conversations and the activities she introduced; on the other hand, she had been afraid that she would not measure up to her imagined standards of my excellence. Shannon's fear of my judgment had been a significant factor in the shaping of this research.

Shannon's reluctance to have me observe her classroom had been tied to her identity construction as a teacher. Shannon wanted to be a good teacher, one who stimulated her students intellectually, who rose to the levels of excellence expected by her school community, and who successfully challenged her students to see the issues in the world beyond their middleclass neighbourhoods. These aims had often set up conflicts in Shannon's teaching life as she disrupted the comfort zones of students and fellow teachers. However, the main source of conflict had been Shannon's internal conflict about her definition of excellence and her personal appraisal of her teaching. I had been a catalyst in this conflict. Because I had chosen to work with Shannon based on her interest in teaching Aboriginal literature and her passion for social justice issues, she had felt as if she needed to perform for an exacting audience. Her lack of confidence in her abilities had become apparent to both of us, and she was now able to discuss this:

I was really nervous about you ever being in my room, and the reason is that I thought that it would be so obvious that I was a person trying to do something but actually blinded in ways of talking to kids, and you would be able to see those. Because for me, that's part of the lesson here that whether you know it or not

you're within the membrane of an ideology and it by definition has blind spots, and so I felt really vulnerable having you watch me teach this class. And it was new ground for me and my students, so I felt really stiff, and I'm not sure whether I would have tried if you hadn't been there. Because part of what I was worried about too, just given my personality was if my kids aren't into this, Geraldine's going to think I suck. So I'd tighten up and end up having a more mediocre exchange with them, whereas, I was thinking afterward, if she hadn't been there, what would I have done at this point or at that point. I would have been much more in their face and experimental with my ideas, but I was scared to say something.

Whereas initially her concerns lay with her own feelings, in retrospect, Shannon was able to consider how her students may have felt in this situation. This marked a significant shift in her perception of herself as teacher and her understanding of student responses.

By the end of this research project, Shannon was able to look at herself as a teacher and learner in ways she had not done previously. Shannon's expectations of herself were set high and she was afraid of failure. Shannon continued to offer her analysis of the situation:

"How do I give Geraldine something valuable here, knowing that by definition, a bias is not something that you're conscious of at a given moment." Something about this kind of teaching has to do with self-awareness, and I think, I guess a lot of students like to keep this impression that teachers are and should be experts. And yet by definition when you're doing this stuff, you're going to discover your own blind spots as you teach and you never quite get rid of them. I'm as white as any of my students, right?

Her recognition of her own blind spots was interesting. Shannon, who had constructed herself as a social activist, was now considering the role that her white middleclass upbringing and education had played in the shaping of her identity.

Admitting that she did not know all the answers was difficult for Shannon although she recognized her role as a model of lifelong learning. Shannon was dealing with new



material and did not have the time to master it before she needed to use it in the classroom. She had set very high expectations for herself and, although she talked about learning together with her students, she also did not want to be caught without an answer, fearing that it undermined her classroom presence. Her experience with the Inuit literature unit gave her some insight into how other teachers may have felt when confronted by the new curriculum and unfamiliar texts:

They expect their teachers to be masters and I have never said, "I don't know" as often as I have when I taught the Inuit stuff. Oh my, the number of questions they asked me where I simply didn't know. I think that's another thing, you know, about why people don't do it. I know teachers that would be so uncomfortable that they couldn't do it because they've been teaching for 25 years and they're known as experts.

The shift in curricular expectations had unsettled teachers and students. Shannon, a young, energetic teacher, enthusiastic about changing the face of English classrooms, felt unsettled when the pace of change became faster than she was prepared for. Her experience in the research project enabled her to recognize that discomfort and realize that her peers had experienced the same thing at a different level when the new curriculum unsettled their comfort zones.

As Shannon recognized how her comfort zone had been unsettled, she became more aware of how she was unsettling her students' comfort zones. Shannon wanted her students to become unsettled; she wanted them to question their world views and see the racism and inequity that existed in their school, their neighbourhood, and their community. However, she did not want to leave her students feeling helpless but wanted them to see how they could make positive changes by examining the underlying

suppositions of the community and by taking action to make changes in their own lives. Shannon wanted her students to recognize that only by making personal change would community change come about.

At the time of our final interview, Shannon was in the midst of another school year and was working to raise consciousness and bring about personal change with a new group of grade twelve students. Wanting her students to question societal structures, Shannon was looking for ways to raise some of the issues she saw as important so that the students would see the inequities that existed in the present system. She used her experiences from the previous year to reshape her approach to equity issues, centring on Canadian issues rather than the American civil rights movement. The previous school year, Shannon had used excerpts from *Malcolm X* to begin discussions on prejudice and racism. She had then used the poetry of Fred Wah to connect the students to a Canadian context. Shannon was dissatisfied with the results and chose a different approach this time. She asked her students to consider the Canadian ideal and read one student response to me:

I feel Canada isn't quite a genuine mosaic. There are a lot of people who are racist, sexist or prejudiced in other ways. Canada is supposed to welcome every human being into our country, regardless of their colour, sex, origin, sexual identity. These people should be treated as equal and as respectfully as any other human beings and I find that fiction very, very difficult.

This response does not differ greatly from the responses Shannon received the previous year in at least one respect: students recognized that the ideal did not exist. Shannon was concerned that students again had difficulty identifying their own complicity in the perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudices.

Shannon defined this inability to recognize one's own participation in the system as a head-heart split. She had used this term frequently in our earlier conversations and used it again in this final conversation. Although she had earlier identified this conundrum in students, she now thought that teachers also reflected an intellectual-emotional split. She saw how teaching in a Catholic school system perpetuated the split in her own approach to issues in the classroom:

But I think a lot of the teachers have this mind-heart split as well. And one of the reasons I don't teach stuff – like I read that book you gave me, *Funny Boy*, and the one scene in the garage was no more explicit – I mean we have Margaret Atwood. I found it very interesting to read because by that point I was very allied with the character – but I don't know what my administration expects of me. If I brought them into the classroom, I'm not sure if there would be hell to pay or not. If I presented this as a coming of age story, I don't know if my administration could support me in that.

Shannon wanted to unsettle her students' world views and answer the questions they were asking; however, she needed to find a balance between her personal ideology and the ideology of a Catholic education system before she could risk providing answers.

Although certain equity issues such as homosexuality were difficult to broach, Shannon felt that she had more latitude when it came to dealing with racism. Her experiences with Aboriginal literature during the research project had given her more confidence to challenge the students' perceptions. She spoke of the ways that we have built our society on the concept of equality and how students perceived equality as sameness. Those students identified differentiated treatment of specific groups as a violation of equality:

They want to think we're all the same and if things are going well, then everybody's equal. And I think some of the students who are upset, are upset because they have this perception that the government just writes blank cheques to Native people, and they're [students] upset about that. If they [Aboriginals] had the character and the discipline, they would get these things on their

own. They [students] perceive difference as being unfair, so they don't get that negotiating quality of equity, you know, the contextualizing on an individual basis. I wonder if that's something that takes a little bit of time to get.

Shannon was beginning to understand her students' reluctance to change their perceptions and prejudices knowing that they viewed Canada as a level playing field.

Because Shannon recognized her students' inability to "contextualize on an individual basis," she realized that the head-heart disconnect was greater than she had initially suspected. The students believed that Canada was a land of equal opportunity, and they were able to use stories of immigrant successes to validate that belief. As a result, their sweeping generalizations prevented them from making an intellectual or emotional connection to issues of racism. Because they believed everyone was the same, they didn't see their attitudes as prejudicial but saw the Aboriginal "Other" as refusing to fit in to the societal grand narrative.

Shannon was very interested in theoretical approaches to literature and had hoped to find an interpretive community among other teachers of English within her board. Her experience as an English graduate student had introduced her to such a community, and she anticipated finding a similar community among other English teachers. She had not been able to do so, and Shannon enjoyed participating in the research because it provided her with an opportunity to discuss literature and ideas with similar-minded individuals.

The approach through interpretive lenses had been a useful tool for Shannon as she analyzed the texts she chose to use in her classroom, but she had not been explicit in the

use of the lenses with her students. I was curious to hear what aspects from the previous year she had incorporated into her current Canadian literature class:

I was going to say, the way the learning has come out of this secondary round is so much better because of it [her participation], and I was rereading some of the hypotheses I had last year about why they were struggling. So I think I've learned how to better teach this, and also, an issue I was dealing with last year – and we talked about it in the transcripts too – is when you're dealing with the issues-based literature it starts to feel like anti-racist training, and you sort of feel like you're just locking horns with your students.

Shannon was choosing many of the same pieces she had used the previous year but was more confident that she was teaching in a way that enabled her students to see connections between the literary pieces and actual events. To this end, Shannon was organizing small group forums focusing on specific human rights issues. The literature worked as a bridge to the issues that would be researched and discussed in small groups.

In planning her mini forums, Shannon was drawing on experience and knowledge students had gained in other classes and outside the school. As she worked with the issues, she came to several realizations. Shannon realized that her students were ready to look at Aboriginal literature that was not doom and gloom. The second realization Shannon made was the need for interdisciplinarity and the possibilities that could be developed if she was able to work together with other teachers. In this situation, she saw the history teacher as an ideal partner. Currently, her school was not set up for that type of collaboration, but the possibility of working collaboratively and in an interdisciplinary manner at some point in the future interested Shannon.

Shannon wanted to introduce her students to Aboriginal literary theory in ways that would help students better understand the context and the world view presented in Aboriginal literature. One issue she identified was the place of story in Aboriginal culture compared to the place of story in contemporary Canadian culture. She set them this assignment:

You've heard the expression that the person who dies with the most toys wins. Based on the way the storyteller tells the story, what would his version of that be? I think the one who dies with the most stories wins. What does a life on the surface lived with the first goal look like compared to a life lived with the second goal? How do you measure the number of stories a person dies with? We've already talked about what an honour it is for somebody to share a story, to become a keeper of a story. We've done work to sort of establish that.

Helping students to develop a different perspective on story was one aspect of Shannon's approach to Aboriginal literature. She also wanted students to understand how language was manipulated as a method of resistance and how what appeared as weakness may have actually been strength. She engaged her students in the following analogy to illustrate her point:

So I said, if you're watching a boxing match and you see someone getting pummelled and you don't think they will last, and then from somewhere deep within they turn on the power to fight back and it leads to a technical knock out, how do you feel at that moment when the fight reverts?" He said, "Excited, surprised." I said, "Well, when you read 'The Devil's Language' that's the point. It sounds negative, but look what she's doing." There's something jubilant about that kind of aggression, that back in your face, that insistence in defining things in ways that are true to you. We talked about moments of their own where they made decisions to stand for what they believe in even if it goes against an authority figure or a principle. So I said on the surface, someone might think this looks really negative, but it's about a people recovering their spirit and energy, to make themselves known.

Using the metaphor of the boxing match enabled Shannon to shift the perspective in her classroom. The students had all experienced the phenomenon of cheering for the

underdog and hoping for the upset. Situating Aboriginal literature in that context forced students to reconsider their assumptions.

Shannon used one other metaphor to challenge her students to reconsider their world views while they were working with the Thomas King short story “Magpies.” Through this exercise, she was able to show the students how their personal world views affected their interpretation of a literary piece:

I tried to give them the image of treating world view like a sheet, and we're going to hang it out on the line, and we're going to watch it blow in the wind, and we're going to walk around the clothes line and look at it from different angles. And there's this thing purely inside of us that looks at another culture and just looks at it and what it does to all the people involved.

So we read “Magpies” and really enjoyed it. One of the questions was, “Based on character, compare Ambrose and Wilma.” The words they used for Wilma were, she's more sophisticated, she's smarter; they used the words normal, sophisticated, and smarter, and one of them actually used the word civilized, and then at the end I said, “That's the sheet hanging on the line. It's because she's an agent of standard English and the Catholic Church and white law and order that she's smarter and more civilized and normal.” Because that's what we're doing with all of this material is trying to see the way we've learned how to see. Because I bet you didn't pick those words consciously and perhaps at this moment you even want to take them back. Maybe it's not what you meant, but it's what you said.

Shannon was attempting to show the students how their world views influenced their interpretations at a subconscious level. By guiding the students through exercises such as this, Shannon challenged her students to examine their world views to see if their words matched what they thought they believed.

Shannon worried that students were able to articulate what was perceived as politically correct while their actions told another story. They had not internalized their socially

progressive iterations in ways that affected their actions. What Shannon discovered during these discussions was that the students did not understand their role in the perpetuation of systemic racism. She needed to show students the ways in which their stereotypes and prejudices surfaced. By systematically drawing attention to their preconceptions, Shannon hoped to move them toward change but she was becoming increasingly aware that making change came slowly and only with intensive experiences.



## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **SUPPORTING PEBBLES**

#### **Introduction**

Often in the building of an Inukshuk, the stones do not balance perfectly, and the builder must insert smaller pebbles to prevent the larger pieces from tumbling down. After conducting the research and contemplating the experience and findings, I realized that three interconnected issues had surfaced that I had not anticipated. For this reason, my initial literature review did not provide enough background to analyze the data and arrive at implications. Although the three emerging issues could be categorized as anti-racism, I have further subdivided them into anti-racist education, resistance to multicultural literature, and identity construction, issues closely connected to the decolonizing process. My reading in each of these areas is narrowly focused on teachers and students.

#### **Anti-racist Education**

Kate and Shannon both indicated that introducing Aboriginal literature to their students and counteracting the preconceived notions and stereotypes often felt like anti-racist education. Courses in anti-racist education have been a compulsory part of pre-service teacher education in Saskatchewan for more than a decade, and both teachers had participated in these classes. Observing the responses of their students to the texts and

listening to their rationales caused Kate and Shannon to remember the responses of their pre-service colleagues and the difficulties inherent in recognizing colonialism and complicity in the colonial process.

Verna St. Denis and Carol Schick (2003), two of the professors who had been responsible for the anti-racist education classes at the University of Saskatchewan, identify three popular ideological assumptions held by many students: race doesn't matter; everyone has equal opportunity; and by individual acts and good intentions, one can secure innocence as well as superiority. St. Denis and Schick note that the statement "race doesn't matter" frequently indicates a reluctance to discuss race and racial identities. The authors are concerned that this denial "supports differences of power reflected in historical, social, political, and economic practices" and prevents the examination of institutionalized racism (pp. 62-63). The second popular assumption views Canadian society as a meritocracy, a view which "ignores how dominant group identifications facilitate access to social and institutional power" (p. 64). Again, this view denies the existence of institutionalized racism. St. Denis and Schick claim that the third assumption is the most difficult to deal with because it forces students to examine "the production of their own identifications" and the realization that "the notion of innocence and goodness depends on the marginalization of the *other*" (p. 65, italics in the original).

The examination of anti-racist education by Schick and St. Denis's (2005) identifies curriculum as "one of the significant discourses through which white privilege and 'difference' are normalized" (p. 298). They are concerned that terms such as "multiculturalism" facilitate the "whitewashing" of Canada, drawing attention away from

racially constructed identities and connecting cultural difference to lack of school success (p. 306). The work of Schick and St. Denis is particularly relevant because it is based in Saskatchewan where Aboriginal Canadians are included in the racialized Other. Their experience as anti-racist educators has revealed the extent to which Whiteness is normalized in Saskatchewan society and discussions of race are avoided.

St. Denis and Schick have grounded their work on the discourse surrounding the construction of Whiteness. Christine Sleeter (1993a; 1993b) examined the language used to discuss racism and found that “we semantically evade our own role in perpetuating White racism by constructing sentences that allow us to talk about racism while removing ourselves from the discussion” (1993b, p. 14). Through the use of passive sentence constructions and making racism rather than racists the subject of the sentence, speakers are able to abrogate their responsibility in the perpetuation of racism. Sleeter also examines the focus on ethnicity rather than race as a method of minimalizing the restricted access to opportunity afforded non-whites in American society. Sleeter contends that ethnicity theory supports the concept of an open social system where success is dependent upon the work ethic of the individual. Her concern with this theoretical framework is that it

denies the significance of visible, physiological marks of ancestry and of the history of colonization and harsh subjugation that Europeans and Euroamericans extended over other peoples. In so doing it denies white social institutions any complicity in the subordinate status of people of color. (1993a, p. 161)

The focus on ethnicity rather than race is a hallmark of our current education system as we celebrate the multicultural mosaic that we believe represents Canada. Multi-cultural days are an annual occurrence at Canadian schools and universities as we celebrate diversity by sharing food, fashion, and festivals. February marks “Black History Month” where we celebrate Canada’s role in the underground railway and applaud the successes of Afro-Canadians. In each of these cases, we focus on the individuals who have achieved success in a Eurocentric context and applaud our open door policies, blaming racist practices on the individual rather than the collective.

Additional researchers such as Beverly Tatum (1992), Aruna Srivastava (1997), Leslie Roma and Timothy Stanley (1997), and Gary Howard (1999) consider the role of the education system in combating racism. Tatum, while concerned with all racist attitudes, focuses on the attitudes of White students who carry with them the “social power inherent in the systemic cultural reinforcement and institutionalization of those racial prejudices” (p. 3). Recognizing power differential is central to combating racism and the members of the dominant group need to “identify and interrupt the cycle of oppression” (p. 4). Tatum’s experiences as a college professor teaching anti-racism led her to understand that White students needed to be able to define themselves as White before they were able to hear and understand others’ stories of racism and before they could become agents of change.

Srivastava (1997) describes the difficulties of leading anti-racist education in the academy where personal narratives of students and teachers are met with general distrust. In order to arrive at self-actualization, Srivastava believes we need to understand history

and how our actions are “complicit in the academic structures of oppression” (p. 115). We can expect the anti-racist classroom to be “chaotic, confusing, and disordered, a place of pain, denial, anger, and anxiety” where students and teachers are vulnerable and often physically, emotionally and intellectually exhausted (pp. 120-121).

Recognizing the “asymmetries of power and historical/political and cultural contexts that define and redefine the borders of nations, nationalist pedagogies, and curricula” (Roma & Stanley 1997 p. 205), Roma and Stanley draw attention to the role played by students as agents of cultural production as they attempt to make “sense of the hegemonic struggles” and “the contradictions of inhabiting places of neocolonialism and racism while at the same time striving for languages and community identification that challenge their effects” (p. 205). Although educators can learn from, and with, their students, they need to provide a supportive environment where these struggles can take place.

White teachers play an important role in multiracial schools. Howard (1999) recognizes the potential for intense emotional experiences that can occur in the classroom. He feels that White teachers can “contribute to the healing of dominance by demanding honesty in the teaching and construction of history” (p. 71). Again he underscores the complicity of our educational institutions in the perpetuation of power imbalances. Howard feels that the work of advocacy has too often “fallen on the shoulders of people of color” and the burden of reeducating Whites needs to be shared. Howard challenges White educators to open the circles of power and become involved in “reeducating many of our White colleagues who are not ready for such inclusion” (p. 76).

Educators involved in anti-racist education recognize the power imbalance that supports a Eurocentric status quo. St. Denis and Schick contend that by focusing on ethnicity rather than race, many Canadians have avoided confronting racism and challenging the colonial power structures that support our current society. Anti-racist educators recognize the difficulty inherent in challenging ingrained attitudes but understand the necessity of doing so in order to decolonize classrooms. They also recognize the difficulties students have accepting this new interpretation of society, and anti-racist educators are prepared for students' resistance. Not all students will accept the challenges and become advocates of change and challenge the dominant discourses, but some will and therein lies our hope.

### **Resistance to Multicultural Literature**

Educators interested in calling attention to the power imbalances inherent in our society and exposing racism have approached the issue through a variety of channels. For teachers of English literature, the preferred channel has often been the inclusion of multicultural literature and the quest to open the Western canon. The introduction of multicultural literature has frequently been met with resistance from fellow educators, parents, and teachers. Just as anti-racist education enables participants to examine the ways in which power is constructed, multicultural teaching enables participants to examine the ways knowledge is constructed. James Banks (1993) believes

students should be given opportunities to investigate and determine how cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and the biases within a discipline influence the ways the knowledge is constructed. Students should also be given opportunities to create knowledge themselves and identify the ways in which the knowledge they construct is

influenced and limited by their personal assumptions, positions, and experiences. (p. 11)

Mary Louise Pratt (1996) labels one of the ways in which knowledge has been constructed as the “colonization of the imagination” and identifies current educational reforms as a “process of *decolonization* of culture and the national imagination” (p. 14, italics in original). She contends that fear of the emancipated imagination has motivated colonizers to “deprive the colonized of independent access to cultural institutions” and the means of representing themselves (p. 14). Because European social history is the basis for North American society, those who hold power, including those who have traditionally designed school curricula, meet the introduction of voices that counter this history with resistance. Pratt believes that multiculturalism does not Balkanize minority groups but subverts the agenda of acculturation and enables transculturation<sup>17</sup> as subordinate groups select and invent new discourses while maintaining cultural integrity. Pratt advocates this revisioning of society as shared discourses are developed but recognizes the centre’s resistance to these challenges.

The need for constructions of new knowledge and beliefs can be achieved, according to Jacqueline Royster (1997) through “compassion, communication, cooperation, and courage” as we learn to tell new stories (pp. 141-143). Royster identifies classrooms as political places and feels that educators and students need to be aware of the ways in which these spaces are negotiated. Drawing attention to the values and assumptions imbedded in the curriculum draws attention to the power structures that support those

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<sup>17</sup> Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz coined transculturation to describe the highly selective and inventive absorption of materials from the metropolis as subordinate groups maintain their cultural integrity (Pratt, 1996, p. 17)

values and assumptions. Although Royster advocates new ways of “doing,” she also advocates new ways of “being” in the classroom. Royster hopes that a new sense of community will emerge from the “multiplicity of perspectives,” one which preserves humanity not Western authority (pp. 151-152). However, for the dialogue to occur, the voices need to be heard; one way of ensuring that the voices are heard is through the introduction of multicultural literature and the ensuing conversations.

For students to enter into the dialogue, they must be able to identify and acknowledge their ideological orientations which Richard Beach (1997) describes as the beliefs and attitudes they apply to texts. Beach found that middle-class students responded negatively to texts that challenged their privileged perspectives of the world. Beach contends that students are socialized within their communities and by discourses of gender, class, and race. Students who were exposed to literature that challenged their socialized stance were “resentful of implied challenges to their sense of white privilege” and often denied the existence of racial difference (pp. 75-77). At the same time, many students had a “voyeuristic fascination” with “the other” (p. 79). Beach found that students needed to move beyond empathizing with the characters in the literature and connect those experiences to their “real-world perceptions.” Beach concluded that

some students are able to move beyond stances of resistance to explore how experiences in their own lives, and with texts, are shaped by ideological forces. These students then examine how their own behavior as well as those [sic] of characters are shaped by institutional racism. (p. 88)



Although some students in Beach's study were able to move beyond resistance, many did not. Theresa Rogers found teachers as well as students resisted the challenges to the status quo inherent in the use of multicultural literature. Rogers' study focused on one grade eleven classroom where the teacher chose to approach multicultural literature through the lens of cultural studies. Although the students had a diversity of responses including resistance and engagement, Rogers concludes by noting that "this kind of teaching is not sanctioned by the larger culture of high schools" where many teachers view their job as "transmitting culture rather than critiquing or transforming it" (p. 113). Teachers who see their job as simply teaching reading and writing are unable to see that these processes are performed on cultural artifacts and need to be open to critical inquiry. Teachers who do engage in the task of cultural transformation face resistance on many fronts and realize the task is not an easy one.

Arlette Ingram Willis (1997) also views literature as a form of cultural production and believes teachers must be aware that "the manner in which culturally and linguistically diverse students give meaning to the world is culturally understood and may differ from a mainstream perspective" (p. 135)<sup>18</sup>. She contends that multicultural literature challenges the traditional canon and is therefore challenged by the dominant culture who see these texts as appropriate for use with underrepresented groups but not necessarily in the mainstream. Willis sees several barriers to the acceptance and use of multicultural literature including "the demographics of the teaching population, the history of English methods classes, the teaching of the canon, and the issue of diversity in literacy education for preservice teachers" (p. 140). Changes to the ways literature is approached in our

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<sup>18</sup> I find it ironic that Willis does not identify the mainstream as having a culturally understood world view.

schools are dependent on changes to the way post-secondary institutions approach the teaching of English and education, another step in the decolonizing process.

### **Identity Construction**

Recognizing the ways in which knowledge is socially constructed is a first step toward recognizing the ways that identity is also socially constructed. James Paul Gee (1991) draws attention to how school-based literacy practices are frequently at odds with the home-based literacy practices of students. These narrowly defined literacy practices have been used to “solidify the social order, empower elites and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept the values, norms and beliefs of the elites” (p. 40). Gee (2001) furthers his contention that no literacy is politically neutral and illustrates how students are socialized into learning to read a text in a given way. Interpreting a text in a given way then indicates belonging to or alliance with a specific social group. Gee points out that these practices are not limited to written texts but also “involve ways of talking and listening, acting and interacting, thinking and believing, feeling and valuing as well” (p. 17). One’s social construction is then inextricably linked to one’s literacy practices and both must be changed in order to achieve decolonization.

One’s personal literacies will include the stories one tells about oneself, and these stories are always told within a social context. Anna Sfard and Anna Prusak (2005) label these stories as identifying narratives and further divide these narratives into actual stories (those about the actual state of affairs) and designated stories (those presenting an expected state of affairs). They found that the significance of the storyteller determined whether or not a designated narrative impacted the identity of the individual: “the owners

of the most influential voices are carriers of those cultural messages that will have the greatest impact on one's actions" (p. 18). Institutional narratives, however, have the "capacity to supplant stories that have been part of one's designated identity" (p. 18). The power of institutional narratives in the shaping of personal identity is of paramount importance when examining resistance to challenges of the existing power structures and world views, including the construction of decolonized curricula and teacher identities.

Joy Ritchie and David Wilson (2000) explore the identity construction of four English Language Arts teachers and discuss the importance of social construction in what they term "accidental apprenticeships." Ritchie and Wilson see "accidental apprenticeships" as powerful and pervasive and enacted through all of an individual's experiences. In the case of teachers, the "accidental apprenticeship" includes all the images of teaching to which individuals have been exposed (schools, popular culture, folk representations) and their identities as gendered and classed individuals. The meanings that they construct from their experiences are then filtered through their personal and social contexts. Although involvement in these "accidental apprenticeships" is accidental on the part of the individual, Ritchie and Wilson do not believe they are accidental in culture but "part of an ideology of regulation and control, part of our socialization in very specific epistemologies and discourses" (p. 34). Ritchie and Wilson, in their analysis of teacher narratives, conclude that "the stories experienced teachers tell often reflect their own colonization by the narratives of schooling and their misrecognition of themselves in the ideologies of education. They construct stories that erase their own authority" (p. 66). The deliberate apprenticeships entered into by pre-service teachers place the familiar stories at risk, creating a source of resistance. Ritchie and Wilson believe that

scrutinizing and theorizing these experiences can enable teachers to “consciously locate the sites of their resistance” with the “possibility of intervening in them and contesting them” (p. 14). Ritchie and Wilson encouraged the teachers participating in their study to examine their narratives of identity and locate the sites of resistance. Through this examination, the participants were able to contest their accidental apprenticeships and ground aspects of their deliberate apprenticeships as they consciously constructed their identities as teachers. In the same way, teachers who wish to participate in the decolonization of the classroom need to examine their accidental and deliberate apprenticeships.

### **Conclusion**

Kate’s and Shannon’s experiences in their classrooms and with their colleagues reflected the findings of the aforementioned theorists and researchers. Student responses often fell into St. Denis and Schick’s categories, especially the notion that Canada is a meritocracy and everyone has equal access to opportunities. The students believed that equity and meritocracy were synonymous and therefore saw affirmative action programs as unjust. This view became particularly apparent in Kate’s assignment concerning the “newspaper reality” of Aboriginal Canadians. St. Denis and Schick, Sleeter, and Tatum all note the need for White individuals to acknowledge their Whiteness, and Srivastava comments on the discomfort students experience when the racist substructures of society are exposed. According to Srivastava, students in these contexts often enter into a state of denial. Both Shannon’s and Kate’s students denied their racism or justified it; in both contexts, students were very defensive when their suppositions were challenged. Royster comments on the values and assumptions embedded in the curriculum; Kate identified

how the new English curriculum countered the dominant cultural values and assumptions. Both teachers were concerned that their colleagues' adherence to the old curriculum perpetuated Eurocentric values and assumptions and illustrated the power of institutional narratives in determining educational practice. The societal narratives experienced by students and teachers normalized racist attitudes and influenced the formation of their identity narratives, narratives Shannon and Kate were challenging them to examine.

Resistance to anti-racist education and multicultural literature is closely connected to the identity narratives held by each individual. As Ritchie and Wilson have shown, socialization through daily experiences is central to the construction of identity narratives. The role of significant others and institutions in the construction of those narratives cannot be discounted. If, as Ritchie and Wilson believe, the “accidental apprenticeship” plays such a powerful role in the construction of teacher identities, one can assume that it also plays a powerful role in the construction of racist identities, resulting in resistance when those narratives are challenged. These institutional narratives support the colonial view of Canada and support a colonial view of place. Changing the narratives that shape identity is an important step in shaping the decolonized classroom.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **NALUNAIKKUTAQ**

#### **Interpretations**

##### **Introduction**

In contemporary Canadian society, Inuksuit dot the southern landscape, sentinels along the Trans-Canada Highway, markers on the shores of northern lakes, and monuments in public parks and gardens. Classes are offered in the building of Inuksuit, and they can be found on key chains, glassware, and beer bottles. The building of Inuksuit has become a Canadian national pastime, and the Inukshuk has become a national symbol. Ilanaaq, the friendly Inukshuk, is the official symbol of the 2010 Winter Olympics. As I view the Inuksuit on the southern landscape, I often wonder at their purpose. Do they mark places of veneration or good hunting? Are they directional markers? The Inuksuit erected by the Inuit were always built for a purpose reflective of their place in the landscape, and others seeing the Inuksuit understood the conventions and were able to interpret their meaning. Often one rock, the *nalunaikkutaq* (literally the deconfuser) established the purpose. Collecting information or stones and balancing them on top of each other may

be fun, but at some point, there needs to be a purpose and sense must be made of the experiences.

### **Creating a Decolonized Language Arts Classroom**

My overall goal when I began this research was to further develop the theory and pedagogy involved in the teaching of Aboriginal literature in the senior secondary classroom in order to advance the notion of a decolonized classroom. I did this by exploring contemporary theories of literary criticism relevant to the study of Aboriginal literature, including approaches through colonial and postcolonial discourses and the growing body of theory and criticism written by North American Aboriginals. I then introduced the two teacher participants to these theories and we discussed ways in which they could incorporate the literary theory and their pedagogical knowledge of content as they developed Aboriginal literature units. Shannon and Kate then introduced these literature units to their students and incorporated the new interpretive and pedagogical practices to their classrooms. Through their participation in this study, Kate and Shannon developed new understandings of their classroom practices and the ways in which traditional approaches to teaching and to interpreting literature contributed to the colonization of students. Their conscientious self-reflection enabled them to recognize colonizing practices in their own pedagogical approaches and both teachers made a concerted effort to change these practices.

The increased awareness of colonizing practices and the deliberate consideration of new pedagogical approaches by the two teacher participants resulted in classroom teaching

that implemented decolonizing methodologies. According to Deborah McGregor (2005), “In decolonizing education, the goal is to explore ways in which Aboriginal people can regain control over their own transformation, re-creation and self determination in a contemporary educational setting” (p. 68). My experiences lead me to conclude that these goals are not achievable unless significant changes are made in the traditional school and the individual classroom and are not restricted to Aboriginal educational settings. The decolonization of the classroom is the responsibility of all those involved in the education system and Aboriginal people will not regain control unless a decolonized society recognizes and understands the need for transformation, re-creation, and self-determination. McGregor echoes Freire’s notion of a dialogical approach to education when she describes the roles of participants: “everyone involved in education is both a learner and a teacher” (p. 74). McGregor, as well as Freire, recognizes the political implications of being an educator in this context.

The notion that education is political is one of the first lessons to be learned in the decolonization process. Acknowledging the ways in which traditional educational structures have supported and reinforced colonial attitudes became a central focus for Shannon and Kate. Len Findlay (2004) emphasizes the importance of decolonizing Canadian universities:

The academy must therefore begin anew to decolonize its traditional presumptions, curricula, faculty complement and student body, and research and teaching practices, and do so more radically and more rapidly than hitherto. (p. 370)

The traditional presumptions and curricula have welcomed a Eurocentric student body resulting in graduates who have continued to perpetuate colonial perspectives. The



current system maintains the status quo, producing teachers who are inadvertent colonizers and excluding Aboriginals from the academy:

Canadian universities remain complicitous with residually colonial and defiantly neocolonial policies and practices that continue to produce Indigenous academic “homelessness” (Monture-Angus) and that define what counts as knowledge and who will benefit from its acquisition and exercise, while the beneficiaries and casualties of colonialism stay much the same as they have always been. (p. 370)

Kate and Shannon recognized their complicity in the perpetuation of a colonial educational system and attempted to counter colonialism by introducing new literature and new ways of interpreting that literature. However, they also recognized that the academic system had privileged those individuals with a Eurocentric perspective, resulting in a teaching cohort that continued to privilege Eurocentric perspectives. Although they were frustrated by the intransigence of their peers, they developed a greater understanding of the roots of this resistance and recognized the need to change educational attitudes at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

Efforts to decolonize education are not new and have been met with resistance at all levels and in many contexts. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1981) identified the need to decolonize African classrooms more than two decades earlier:

If we are to do anything about our individual and collective being today, then we have to coldly and consciously look at what imperialism has been doing to us and to our view of ourselves in the universe. Certainly the quest for relevance and for a correct perspective can only be understood and be meaningfully resolved within the context of the general struggle against imperialism. (p. 88)

The general struggle against imperialism, as Kate and Shannon discovered, is ongoing; examining “our view of ourselves in the universe” is difficult and uncomfortable. The

discomfort experienced by the teacher participants and their students was directly related to the ways in which traditional approaches had been disrupted; bell hooks (1994) experienced similar questions when she introduced a feminist approach to English in her college classes:

Teaching in a traditional discipline from the perspective of critical pedagogy means that I often encounter students who make complaints like. "I thought this was supposed to be an English class, why are we talking so much about feminism?" (Or, they might add, race or class.) To the transformed classroom there is often much greater need to explain philosophy, strategy, intent than in the "norm" setting. (p. 42)

Kate and Shannon were often asked why they were talking so much about racism, which their students perceived to be an issue that barely concerned them. Kate was convinced that students saw the inclusion of Aboriginal literature and issues as her personal issue, and Shannon's variation from a genre approach to English frustrated her students. Considering hooks' recommendation, perhaps more time needed to be spent explaining the philosophy, strategy, and intent to the students. Like hooks, we hoped that

we were all going to break through collective academic denial and acknowledge that the education most of us had received and were giving was not and is never politically neutral. Though it was evident that change would not be immediate, there was tremendous hope that this process we had set in motion would lead to a fulfillment of the dream of education as the practice of freedom. (p. 30)

Shannon, Kate, and I were regretfully forced to acknowledge that change was not immediate and perhaps not even discernible. The greatest change occurred in our understandings of the process and the potential approaches to the issues, but we lived with the hope that we had set in motion our dream of a decolonized classroom.

### **Reshaping Teacher Identities**

Kate, Shannon, and I began this research project with enthusiasm and hope. We imagined great changes in the ways in which high school students interpreted literature and understood the experiences of Aboriginal Canadians. Although I was interested in the experiences of two teachers who introduced their students to critical theory and Aboriginal literature, I had no idea that those experiences would cause my participants to struggle with their identities as individuals and teachers.

Identity construction is complicated. Our personal understandings of ourselves are influenced by our experiences, our familial and societal stories, and how we accept or question those narratives as we continually reformulate our personal narrative. Our personal narratives, however, can never be removed from their contexts, and the contexts of Shannon's and Kate's experiences are central to the understanding of this research. Ritchie and Wilson (2000), in their study of teacher narratives and identity, discuss the significant and often unrecognized role of the accidental apprenticeship in shaping teacher behaviours. Both Shannon and Kate were very aware of how they had been socialized and the ways they now worked against that socialization. Each of them took personal and professional risks as they challenged their peers and students to examine existing societal structures.

Shannon, throughout the research, struggled with her identity as a classroom teacher for two reasons. First, Shannon's accidental apprenticeship and her deliberate apprenticeship had positioned her to be a social activist. Her familial and social experiences had supported the postcolonial and anti-racist classes she had taken while at university, and

Shannon was conscious of white advantage, systemic racism, and social justice issues. Shannon deliberately chose to unsettle the narratives of her students and peers and was met with resistance. Shannon was referred to by her teaching colleagues as a “bleeding heart” and identified as the teacher who would be interested in the social justice mailings that came to the school. Shannon was disheartened by the resistance of her peers, but her experiences echo those of bell hooks (1994): “We had not realized how much faculty would need to unlearn racism to learn about colonization and decolonization and to fully appreciate the necessity for creating a democratic liberal arts learning experience” (p. 38).

Shannon was also able to identify how she disrupted the white middle-class narratives of her students by exposing them to social justice issues in the community. The students resisted this disruption to their world views by disrupting the classroom and, as Shannon reported, challenging her authority. This classroom disruption precipitated Shannon’s second struggle with identity and concerned her construction of my expectations. Shannon worried that she would not measure up to my standards and that I would find her teaching inadequate. I believe Shannon’s struggles to gain the respect of her peers and students undermined her confidence in her own abilities. I also believe that succeeding in this venue was critical as it would validate her efforts to “teach from a postcolonial perspective.” In the face of constant negative feedback, Shannon sought my approval to affirm what she was doing in her classroom. However, Shannon, like hooks (1994), had no teaching models to draw on and her fear was legitimate:

Even those of us who are experimenting with progressive pedagogical practices are afraid to change.... I had absolutely no model, no example of

what it would mean to enter a classroom and teach in a different way. The urge to experiment with pedagogical practices may not be welcomed by students who often expect us to teach in the manner they are accustomed to. (pp. 142-143)

Shannon's students resisted the new perspectives and approaches she brought to the study of literature. Shannon must be commended for daily choosing to put herself and her beliefs on the table and challenging her students to examine how they benefited from unearned advantage. In spite of discouragement and frustration, Shannon approached each day with enthusiasm and conviction.

Kate, as an adult, realized that her apprenticeship in societal norms had not been accidental; her parents had deliberately chosen to hide her Aboriginal heritage to ensure that she was socialized in a white middle-class environment. This choice came with cost because her mother created an identity as an orphan and severed ties with her family. However, in the eyes of Kate's parents, their sacrifice had been rewarded by the academic successes of their children. Kate identified her predisposition to social justice issues as a primary reason she chose to champion the marginalized in her choice of literature. Kate's predisposition to advocacy was also evident in her choice of academic studies and work experiences. Although Kate could quite easily have continued through life ignoring her Métis ancestry, she had chosen not to and this choice precipitated her identity struggle.

Kate occupied the unenviable position of having benefited from unearned white advantage and now felt guilty on two accounts: first that she had these advantages and second that she lived with the shame her parents associated with an Aboriginal identity.

Because she only learned of her Aboriginality as an adult, she had not been part of the Métis community, and feared she would be perceived as an impostor. She was reluctant to disclose her identity to her students because of the community misconceptions about Aboriginals and her fear that students would interpret her choice of literature as self-interested. Interestingly, Kate's position as an Aboriginal educator raised in the dominant culture was not unusual. A significant number of Aboriginal educators have had similar experiences; some were victims of the scoops and raised in non-Aboriginal adoptive and foster families; others were members of mixed marriages; and still others grew up in Aboriginal families who chose to live outside the Aboriginal community. Although their stories are not part of this narrative, I wonder if their experiences are similar.

As an Aboriginal teacher, Kate was concerned with the students' perceptions of her. Although students didn't automatically identify her as an Aboriginal, she felt the need to counter their misconceptions and disclosed her ancestry. When the students learned that she was Métis, she was caught between defending her heritage and feeling apologetic. Many of her students saw members of the Métis and First Nations communities as being eligible for a multitude of unearned advantages, and their poor understanding of history and the treaties underpinned these perceptions. Kate was unsure whether her explanations made things better or worse. The dilemma of whether or not to register as a Métis hinged on the perceptions of others. Kate wanted to register to give her daughter access to the community and sense of belonging and pride that Kate never had. On the other hand, she did not want people to think that she was looking for a free education for

her daughter<sup>19</sup>. Although she understood the history and politics of her heritage, she also understood the misconceptions that were viewed as truths in her community.

As an Aboriginal teacher, Kate often felt silenced by the negative preconceptions students held. Her White students did not recognize their own unearned advantage but felt that Aboriginals had unearned advantages whereas other members of society had earned their advantages. Countering these myths was of concern to both teachers. Shannon hoped that statistical evidence might solve the problem. Again we arrived at the “head-heart” dilemma. The statistical data were available for all to access, yet, as Wuttunee (2003) points out, the media, in the presentation of the “newspaper reality” of Aboriginal lives, frequently choose to ignore the statistical evidence in favour of the lurid and sordid. Kate’s students had an ideal opportunity to see a different reality but chose to recognize Kate as an exception to the rule. While Kate was discouraged by her students’ interpretations, their resistance reflects “the structures of social inequality embedded over the decades in the colonial legal system” (Battiste & McConaghy, 2005, p. 10) and other colonial structures such as schools. By exposing systemic racism and challenging students to recognize their complicity and the complicity of the school in perpetuating the stereotypes, Kate was entering into the realm of the Indigenous humanities:

The privileging and policing of Western knowledge and its educational apparatus therefore necessitates that every institution claiming to be a thinking or a teaching place be held to account for the presumptions and entitlements it too rarely questions, the exclusions and injustices it happily or unthinkingly practices in the name of objectivity, universality or excellence. (Battiste, et. al., 2005, p. 11)

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<sup>19</sup> Recognition of Métis status would give her daughter access to subsidized educational programs such as the Saskatchewan Urban Teacher Education Program.

Kate asked her students to question their entitlements and think critically about their role in the community and the ways in which they viewed the Aboriginal Other in their midst. Her school, with its structures that invited segregation, was ideally situated for this interrogation of place, an institution that needed “to be thought about and rethought, especially in [its relation] to Indigenous knowledge and history” (Battiste, et. al., 2005, p. 11). However, her students resisted rethinking their relationship to place and left Kate questioning hers.

Kate struggled with her identity on several fronts. First, she questioned her students’ responses to her disclosure and was concerned that they saw Aboriginal issues as her bandwagon rather than a legitimate community issue. Kate was silenced by her fear of the students’ responses to her stories; hooks (1994) sees these stories as an important part of the resistance and liberation cycle:

Identity politics emerges out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and meaning to struggle. Critical pedagogies of liberation respond to these concerns and necessarily embrace experience, confessions and testimony as relevant ways of knowing, as important, vital dimensions of any learning process. (pp. 88-89)

Kate wanted to expose the racism in the community and have students become aware of how it was perpetuated. She hoped their growing awareness would break the cycle. However, if they felt she was motivated by personal gain, she thought they would only pay lip service to the issues, telling her what they thought she would want to hear. Although Kate struggled with revealing her identity to her non-Aboriginal students, she also recognized the power of her disclosure for Aboriginal students in the school. In their case, her identity had the potential to identify an ally and a role model. These were the



students that were of the greatest concern to Kate. And finally, Kate felt the need to claim her heritage to end the cycle of shame in her family. She wanted her daughter to be proud of her ancestry and feel a connection to her historical roots.

Over the course of the research study, Kate and Shannon questioned their identities as teachers. Shannon seemed to lack confidence in her ability as a teacher, and Kate was concerned about her Aboriginal identity. Both teachers, however, clear in their commitment to social justice issues, were beginning to understand how that commitment shaped their identities. Although they had not seen radical shifts in the perspectives of their students, they were committed to continue disrupting the status quo in the hope that the cracks they exposed might eventually grow larger and lead to new understandings in their students. As hooks (1994) points out,

Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (p. 21)

In spite of their frustrations and discouragements, Shannon and Kate were committed to taking those risks as they continued the work of decolonization in the high school English classroom.

### **Exposing Prevalent Student Attitudes**

Although Kate and Shannon were able to interrogate their accidental apprenticeships and craft personal narratives that countered the social norms, the majority of their students had not yet begun to question how they were being socialized. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) examined how the accidental apprenticeships of teachers were a significant force

in the shaping of teacher identities. It is my contention that these accidental apprenticeships were also a significant force in the shaping of student identities, explaining why students had such difficulty connecting their experiences with the literature and their personal lives. Ritchie and Wilson noted that education students' engagements with texts were limited because they did not understand that their interpretations of a text were "shaped by their histories in particular social and political contexts, by their race, gender, and social class" (p. 51). The grade twelve students in Shannon's and Kate's classrooms were also unaware of the contexts that shaped their interpretations. Teaching in ways that exposed those contexts led to cognitive dissonance among the students. As a result, most were unable to merge their intellectual understandings with their personal narratives.

When we first met, Shannon indicated that her students were aware of prevalent racist attitudes but were convinced that they themselves were not racist. Shannon's students were very aware of political correctness and knew what was seen as acceptable public opinion. They became incensed if racism was obvious but were unable to see how they perpetuated racist attitudes. Kate's students, living in an environment that exposed them to more Aboriginal people, were more aware of racist attitudes but felt they were justified. Although the students felt that their experiences with Aboriginal people supported the prevalent attitudes, they were unable to see how their preconceptions influenced their interpretations of events. During a classroom conversation, one of Kate's students described the nutritional practices of Aboriginals based on his experiences as a convenience store clerk. Although he perceived the purchase of junk food by an Aboriginal mother as evidence of wasted money and not caring about her

children's nutrition, he did not arrive at the same critique of a White mother's junk food purchases. The community narrative had shaped his interpretation.

Shannon saw the limitations of their ability to interpret events as an inability to understand "the difference between just a personal animosity and systemic racism." Kate, like Shannon, had been frustrated with her students' seeming inability to recognize systemic racism and to shift their attitudes even after identifying the limitations of their stereotypes and was concerned that "except for the bright kids, maybe they just cognitively are not capable of making that leap. " Both teachers agreed that lack of experience validated the held views of the students and exposure to situations where they could identify with or learn from Aboriginals was necessary. hooks (1994) does not believe exposure to the truth is sufficient since convincingly presented untruths have contributed to the current perceptions: "When this collective cultural consumption of and attachment to misinformation is coupled with the layers of lying individuals do in their personal lives, our capacity to face reality is severely diminished as is our will to intervene and change unjust circumstances" (p. 29). Kate and Shannon hoped that they could provide the experiences that would begin to expose the misinformation and plant the seeds of social activism.

Kate saw classrooms that had a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students as one way of gaining this exposure. In her experience with grade nines where there was no alternative program, there was more opportunity for Aboriginal voices to be heard. In fact, Aboriginal students could assume the role of expert at certain times and gained the respect of their peers for the knowledge they held. However, these opportunities did not

extend into the upper years. Most Aboriginal students chose to move into the alternative Northern Lights program, “whitening” the other classes. Their reasons for this choice can be understood. The Northern Lights program was designed for students at risk, and many Aboriginal students fell into this category. As more Aboriginal students participating in the program successfully completed high school, it became more appealing for other students to join them. In a community rife with racism and in an environment traditionally foreign and hostile, solidarity was very appealing. However, as a result, the prevailing attitudes about special treatment were supported. Not understanding the need for the program or the workload of the program, many regular program students assumed that the Northern Lights students were getting preferential treatment because of their race. So, although the program met the needs of the Aboriginal students, it also supported a segregated community.

Shannon identified the place of privilege held by her students as a major stumbling block in changing attitudes. They, like most privileged individuals, assumed that all people had these same advantages and that Aboriginal people were squandering their opportunities. Their knowledge of the Aboriginal Other was based on the opinions of others, “newspaper reality,” and infrequent encounters. Shannon easily drew parallels between the observations of St. Denis and Schick (2003) and her observations. Her students also viewed Canada as a meritocracy where race did not matter and they became defensive if those opinions were challenged. Her students also did not wish to acknowledge their ‘whiteness’, an acknowledgement both hooks (1994) and Giroux (2005) see as important. Shannon’s classroom, predominantly white and Eurocentric, mirrors the classroom hooks describes in this excerpt:

This is why it is so crucial that whiteness be studied, understood, discussed – so that everyone learns that affirmation of multiculturalism, and an unbiased inclusive perspective, can and should be present whether or not people of color are present. Transforming these classrooms is as great a challenge as learning how to teach well in the setting of diversity. Often if there is one lone person of color in the classroom she or he is objectified by others and forced to assume the role of the “native informant.” (p. 43)

The lone student of Chinese ancestry in Shannon’s classroom certainly experienced objectification, and fear of assuming the role of “native informant” may have played a part in the denial of Aboriginal ancestry by students in Kate’s classroom. Giroux is concerned that failure to interrogate whiteness as an ethnic category results in a failure to “critique forms of European and American culture that situate difference in structures of domination or reconstruct a discourse of race and ethnicity in a theory of difference that highlights questions of equality, justice, and liberty as part of an ongoing democratic struggle” (p. 89). He stresses the importance of “giving students the opportunity to speak, to locate themselves in history, and become subjects in the construction of their identities and the wider society” (p. 109). Kate and Shannon, by introducing their students to Aboriginal literature were involved in what Giroux defines as border pedagogy, an approach that “decenters as it remaps” resulting in a “terrain of learning that becomes inextricably linked to the shifting parameters of place, identity, history, and power” (p. 109). Through this pedagogical approach the teachers and students are encouraged to reconceptualize their identity in relation to place. Since Shannon and Kate were only beginning the border crossings involved in this pedagogical approach, it is not surprising that they were unprepared for their students’ responses.

Although Kate and Shannon were frustrated by the unsubstantiated opinions of their students, their use of Aboriginal literature served several important purposes. First, the students were now voicing their opinions in a classroom. This gave both Shannon and Kate an opportunity to respond to their opinions and present counter arguments. Had they not introduced students to this literature, they may not have had these conversations. Although they were disappointed to hear the students' comments, the openness with which students entered into the debate allowed the teachers to show the cracks in their premises. Second, knowing the opinions held by the students enabled Kate and Shannon to consider teaching strategies that would combat these perceptions.

### **Opening the Canon and Expanding Interpretive Possibilities**

Recent changes to English Language Arts curricula advocate the introduction of multicultural literature; in the Saskatchewan context, specific reference to literature by Aboriginal authors is made. Just as Findlay (2004) has exhorted the post-secondary academy to "always Indigenize" and Ngugi (1981) has advocated for the inclusion of African literatures in the Kenyan academy, Saskatchewan curriculum writers encourage teachers to reconsider the school canon. Including Aboriginal literature exposes students to other conceptualizations of place and encourages them to rethink their notions of place. Concepts of place cannot be separated from historical understandings and "students must be offered opportunities to read texts that both affirm and interrogate the complexity of their own histories" (Giroux, 2005, p. 22). As Kate and Shannon introduced Aboriginal literature to their classes, they were able to initiate conversations that focused on their students' perceptions of place and their interpretations of history. They were also able to interrogate the school canon. As Giroux (1992) points out

The privileged texts of the dominant or official canons should be explored with respect to the important role they have played in shaping, for better or worse, the major events of our time. Moreover, there are forms of knowledge that have been marginalized by the official canons. There are noble traditions, histories, and narratives that speak to important struggles by women, Afro-Americans, minorities, and other silenced groups [Aboriginals] that need to be heard so that such groups can lay claim to their own voices as part of a process of both affirmation and critical inquiry. (p. 100)

Introducing Aboriginal literature provided an opportunity for Aboriginal students to lay claim to their own voices and for all students to begin a critical inquiry into their interpretations of literature.

I had hoped that introducing the students to the lenses of critical theory would be one teaching strategy that facilitated the dialogue. As theorists of antiracist education have indicated, most students are unaware of the contexts that shape their interpretations of narratives and events. Introducing high school English students to a diversity of interpretive strategies provided them with the opportunity to see how more than one understanding of a particular piece of literature was possible. Giroux (2005) suggests that educators

should provide students with the opportunity to read texts dialogically through a configuration of many voices, some of which offer resistance, some of which provide support. Border pedagogy also stresses that students be provided with the opportunity to critically engage the strengths and limitations of the cultural and social codes that define their own histories and narratives. (p. 108)

Introducing the postcolonial lens gave the teachers an opportunity to open up conversations about colonialism and its effects on groups of people. Students were able to identify with this in part, but solely in relation to visible minorities. They did not see the effect colonialism had had on the lives of their family members. Most students were

descendants of European immigrants whose families had been in Canada several generations. These students did not see the loss of language and culture in their own families as a part of a colonization process. This amalgamation of European cultures into Canadian culture, the euphemistic mosaic that often promoted a “folkfest” view of culture, may have worked against the preservation of culture. Those groups who, often because they were visible minorities, were able to maintain language and culture were often viewed as outsiders. The students whose families adapted to the dominant culture had a very different view of cultural retention and did not understand why other groups could not or would not do the same.

The majority of students in Shannon’s and Kate’s classrooms were representative of Euro-Canadians in a Saskatchewan context. From their position in the centre, they had difficulty understanding marginalization. Those students who were not members of the centre remained, for the most part, voiceless. Shannon related incidents where individual students had approached her privately with their concerns, but the students did not raise these issues in the classroom. The silence of such students underscores the silencing of the margins and emphasizes the need to expose students to postcolonial literature and perspectives. Kate had students who described themselves as “invisible” members of visible minorities. Although some of these students revealed their status in small groups, they were reluctant to do so in the context of the larger classroom. For Kate’s students, invisibility enabled them to move from the margins to the centre, a place of safety in a high school context.



Introducing postcolonial literary theory to grade twelve students enabled Kate and Shannon to introduce the terms centre and margin and draw attention to how societal institutions shaped identities. Both teachers had always chosen literature that represented the oppressed and marginalized, and Kate had once commented that she felt literature written by the marginalized was perhaps closer to the truth. Although Shannon and Kate hoped that their students would develop empathy and understanding through the study of postcolonial literature, they also hoped their students would become agents of change.

Approaching literature through the lens of postcolonial theory gave Kate and Shannon new strategies for introducing literary interpretations and understandings to their students. The approach through the lens of Aboriginal literary theory was not as successful. I believe the difficulties with this approach arose from our limited understandings of the theory. Both Shannon and Kate had had previous exposure to postcolonial theory in the context of their university studies while Aboriginal literary theory had not been part of their academic training. Because my exposure to Aboriginal theory was also recent and my understandings were limited, I was not able to scaffold them through the theory as intensively as would have been ideal. Rather than developing a broad understanding of the interpretive possibilities available, we narrowed our foci. Shannon used the Aboriginal lens to focus on how Aboriginal authors used language as resistance, drawing on the work of Harjo and Bird (1997). Harjo and Bird describe the ways Aboriginal women have “reinvented the enemy’s language,” paralleling hooks (1994) description of black vernacular: “We take the oppressor’s language and turn it against itself. We make our words a counter-hegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language” (p. 175). This approach gave Shannon insight into the ways Aboriginal

writers used language, and she challenged her students to examine the artistry and power of the reinventions. Kate focused on understandings of community and the land, drawing on the works of Weaver (1997) and de Ramirez (1999). Although both women were able to use the theoretical lens to interpret the literature in respectful ways, their interpretations were closely tied to postcolonialism and theories of resistance. Thomas King (1990) identifies the limitations a postcolonial approach imposes on Aboriginal literature. King feels that

the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions which were in place before colonialism ever became a question, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization, and it supposes that contemporary Native writing is largely a construct of oppression. (p. 12)

King introduces other terms to describe Aboriginal literature that offer new interpretive possibilities and would have benefited this study. Foregrounding the oral tradition and its relationship to Aboriginal literature and theory would also have expanded the interpretive possibilities of the Aboriginal lens.

In spite of the limited understandings of Aboriginal critical theory, Kate felt that her students had understood the literature and were able to use the lenses to make valid interpretations. Her frustration came when they were unable to make the intellectual-personal connection after they had seemingly done so in their literature circles. However, Kate's introduction of the reflective assignment revealed the lack of connections and ultimately led to a conversation concerning these issues. Had Shannon and Kate not introduced Aboriginal literature into their classrooms, these conversations would not have occurred. The introduction of the Aboriginal lens gave the two participating

teachers more interpretive strategies, enabling them to present interpretations that honoured the texts. Shannon furthered her understandings of the use of language as a tool of resistance and was able to introduce this to her students. Kate gave her students the opportunity to understand some Aboriginal values such as community and the land.

Shannon and Kate valued the experiences they had, and wished they could encourage more of their peers to become interested. They contemplated in-service opportunities and sought ways to encourage their colleagues to become interested in other approaches to teaching literature: “I have a real desire to be able to in-service our peers because I know a lot of colleagues don’t teach Aboriginal Lit because they don’t know how to do it with integrity.” One goal of the study, the goal of having Aboriginal literature taught in a way that honours the culture and the author, had been met.

## **Conclusion**

Sorting through the many stories that I gathered during the course of this research project and attempting to make sense of them was a difficult task. Often, in the process, I felt that my confusion needed to be “deconfused.” Just as Aboriginal literature needs to be interpreted in ways that honour the culture and the authors, the research stories needed to be interpreted in ways that honoured the participants. I have tried to do so. Kate and Shannon, in opening their classrooms and their persons, earned my respect and provided me with new understanding of how high school teachers and students negotiate identity. Although this research project began as a study of the possibilities and limitations of introducing theoretical lenses to interpret Aboriginal literature, it became so much more.

The introduction of Aboriginal literature and its interpretations was a catalyst in conversations about racism and societal power structures. Although we had hoped that these conversations would happen, we were unprepared for the narrow views of colleagues and students and the extent to which systemic racism was entrenched in the communities.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **TIKKUUTI**

#### **Implications and New Directions**

Many of the inuksuit that dot the Arctic landscape were erected as directional markers, and a single stone, the tikkuuti or pointer, sends the traveller on. The tikkuuti may mark safe passage or the way toward good hunting or fishing. Whether by a single inukshuk or a combination of inuksuit, the builders clearly established direction for those who followed and marked the route they had travelled. The route I have travelled to this place in time has been circuitous and difficult. Rarely was the path clear and obvious; impediments needed to be circumnavigated or climbed and the end of the journey was never in sight. Although this research journey has ended, the path that was begun needs to be continued. This literary Inukshuk must point to new directions.

This research journey began as I conceived and planned the research, grew to include Shannon and Kate, and moved into their grade twelve English classrooms as they introduced their students to Aboriginal literature and the interpretive lenses of literary critical theories. The introduction of this literature in two Saskatchewan secondary school classrooms exposed the entrenched attitudes of the teachers' students and colleagues.

Resistance to change, to new curricula, to new literature, to new ways of looking at the world, marked every step of this journey. This resistance strongly suggests that students and teachers need more experience in anti-racist education, and curriculum developers in Saskatchewan need to continue the work they have begun by preparing teachers to teach the literature endorsed in the curriculum. Canadian faculties and colleges of education need to ensure that their graduates are prepared to teach in ways that diminish racism and support the multicultural population that attend our schools. And finally, we as researchers need to examine our methodologies as we attempt to unsettle the existing power structures and bring about change.

### **Implications for Classrooms**

Curricula are political documents, reflecting the values and world views of a given jurisdiction. Kieran Egan (2000) in his brief critique of curriculum development describes the curriculum as “an agent of the state in preparing citizens for their future lives” (p. 76). Curriculum developers in the province of Saskatchewan, considering changing demographics and shifting sensibilities, advocated the inclusion of Aboriginal literature in the most recent English Language Arts curriculum documents (1999). Although the developers of the document are to be commended for their forward thinking, the work was not complete with the publication and distribution of the curriculum. For the goals to be realized, more attention needs to be given to providing teachers with in-service training and classrooms with resources.

### **In-service training**

Kate and Shannon, two eager participants, well-educated and widely read in terms of literature and critical theory, felt unprepared to teach Aboriginal literature. Their university English classes had not included Aboriginal literature, and their education classes had not included methodological approaches to Aboriginal texts. However, because they believed in the power of the English classroom to introduce new ideas and plant seeds of change, they introduced Aboriginal literature to their students. Their experiences in the cross-cultural and anti-racist courses during their undergraduate education programs convinced Shannon and Kate to introduce literature that initiated these important conversations about prejudices and racism with their students. They also realized that many of their colleagues were not prepared to teach the literature or moderate the conversations.

In order to moderate these conversations, teachers need to understand that teaching is a political activity. Those teachers prepared to teach in a decolonized classroom must understand the politics of colonialism and the ways in which educational structures have reinforced colonial agenda. In the process, they must also examine their own politics. Giroux (2005) suggests that teachers who take up the discourses of postcolonialism need “to deepen their own understanding of the discourse of various others in order to effect a more dialectical self-critical understanding of the limits, partiality, and particularity of their own politics, values, and pedagogy” (p. 26). Giroux further contends that this approach “emphasizes the primacy of a politics in which teachers assert rather than retreat from the pedagogies they utilize in dealing with the various differences represented by the students who come into their classes” (p. 27).

The border pedagogy advocated by Giroux forefronts difference and encourages decolonizing strategies such as those mandated by the current Saskatchewan English Language Arts curriculum. Kate's and Shannon's experiences with their colleagues revealed high levels of resistance to the implementation of the new curricular philosophy. Shannon felt that many of her colleagues were reluctant to exchange literature they loved and were confident teaching for unfamiliar texts. hooks (1994) identifies two other reasons teachers may resist changing literature and approaches:

Many people know that the focus on difference has the potential to revolutionize the classroom and they do not want the revolution to take place. (p. 144) [and] Fear of losing control in the classroom often leads individual professors to fall into a conventional teaching pattern wherein power is used destructively....Unfortunately, this fear of losing control shapes and informs the professorial pedagogical process to the extent that it acts as a barrier preventing any constructive grappling with issues of class. (p. 188)

Whatever the reason even though the new curriculum had been distributed to all teachers and introductory in-services had been held, many teachers continued basing their teaching on the old document. Kate wondered if we needed to be more prescriptive:

I mean it's lovely to say we want a balance, but if it's still in the end up to the teacher, they can very well not teach that stuff. If we could say, "All right, general expectation that you're going to teach *Hamlet* in B30 and a general expectation that you're also going to teach [an Aboriginal text]." I don't know, maybe we need to say here's a text. If they're not going to grow, maybe we need to say that.

Kate acknowledged the autonomy of the individual teacher, but she was also concerned with teachers who used that autonomy to circumvent the intentions of the curriculum. Like Ngugi (1981) Kate and I were "shocked that syllabuses designed to meet the needs of colonialism should continue" (p. 100) even when new curricula had been



implemented. Both Kate and Shannon felt strongly that teachers needed to be encouraged, and perhaps mandated, to introduce Aboriginal literature. They also advocated additional in-service training to help build confidence in their colleagues.

Kate and Shannon found their participation in the research study had given them new understandings and confidence. They felt strongly that opportunities such as this needed to be made available to all teachers and initiated at the school and board levels. Although their participation had been supported by their administrations, it had not been celebrated. Administrators could have provided opportunities for Kate and Shannon to share their experiences and build on their understandings by encouraging them to facilitate workshops, a logical outcome of this research process.

### **Resources**

Providing in-service training to practising teachers is one important element to ensure that Aboriginal literature is taught in Saskatchewan classrooms; having access to resources is also crucial. Neither Kate nor Shannon had access to well-developed collections of Aboriginal literature. Kate, together with the teachers in the Northern Lights program, had managed to acquire class sets of several works, but the collection needs to be reconsidered as newer and possibly more suitable works become available. Most of the full length texts were what King (1990) would categorize as polemical literature, concerned with the clash of values and the championing of Native values. Access to associational literature may have enabled the students to develop different perspectives and come to new understandings about their perceptions and prejudices. Shannon had individual copies of various works that could be used for independent

reading studies. All poetry and short stories used in both classrooms were photocopies. Kate felt that purchasing Aboriginal literature needed to be part of budgetary planning so that a diversity of literature could be acquired and then taught in all classrooms.

Although texts were one resource sorely lacking in the schools, Shannon and Kate felt that more than the acquisition of literature was needed to ensure the implementation of the curriculum. Shannon identified the need for sample units:

It would be really neat to design a sample unit, similar in structure to other sample units in the English 30A curriculum. Design sample units and maybe even have them on CD Rom because new teachers need that. If they're assigned a class for the first time, they go to the sample units. Give them a unit they can work with; that would probably be one of the best ways of inducting people.

The sample unit could include a variety of strategies for approaching the literature including an introduction to theoretical lenses. Shannon felt that many teachers lacked confidence in their understandings of critical theory and needed additional support to expand their knowledge. In considering ways to introduce critical lenses to other English teachers, Shannon and Kate suggested that interpretive differences could be illustrated by selecting one piece of literature and demonstrating how different theoretical approaches led to different interpretations.

### **Implications for Pre-service Teacher Education**

Although in-service training and resources would help those teachers currently in the system, pre-service teacher educators need to prepare teacher candidates to fulfill the mandate of the current curriculum. All teacher candidates, regardless of teaching specialties, need continued stimulus to benefit from anti-racist and cross-cultural education, including the tools needed to examine their accidental apprenticeships in

education. Those teacher candidates who are planning on teaching literature need courses in postcolonial and Aboriginal literatures and critical theory.

### **Anti-racist and cross-cultural education**

Anti-racist and cross-cultural education has been a required course for Saskatchewan teachers for more than a decade. As St. Denis and Schick (2003) have explained, students are often reluctant to acknowledge their role in the power structures that perpetuate systemic racism and have difficulty connecting the concepts introduced in those courses to their other education courses. Anti-racist education needs to be a central tenet of all education classes so students can begin to see the ways in which their chosen disciplines support Eurocentrism. Cameron McCarthy (1993) believes that a new approach to multicultural education “must begin with a more systematic critique of the construction of school knowledge and the privileging of Eurocentrism and Westernness” (p. 294). For teachers of English, this systematic critique includes an examination of the school canons and the literary voices privileged by inclusion. Students need to consider whose voices are Canadian and what makes them so. The danger of leaving this privilege unexamined is the unknowing and uncritical participation in the hegemonic process rather than participation that “promises the possibility of human liberation and global decolonization” (McGee, 1993, p. 287). Teacher candidates need to see themselves as agents of liberation and decolonization invested in empowering their students, of all ages, to also become agents of change. Teacher education must continue to educate students in anti-racist methodologies since teachers “cannot empower students to embrace diversities of experience, standpoint, behavior, or style if our training has disempowered

us, socialized us to cope effectively only with a single mode of interaction based on middle-class values” (hooks, 1994, p. 187)

### **Selection of teacher candidates**

Kate and Shannon both noted that the teachers most likely to introduce Aboriginal literature and anti-racist thought to their classrooms were teachers with a predisposition toward social justice issues. I believe that these teachers, like Shannon and Kate, would be able to understand the concepts of white unearned advantage introduced in anti-racist education classes. In all likelihood, these teachers would also be able to interrogate their accidental apprenticeships and critique and reshape their identities. Engaging in these activities requires a high level of self-reflection, often seen as an attribute of effective teachers. Perhaps self-reflection and a predisposition toward social justice issues are traits that need to be considered in teacher candidate recruitment.

Although self-reflective practitioners with a passion for social justice issues represent one group of teacher candidates, Kate and Shannon also acknowledged the need for more Aboriginal educators. Both teachers recognized this need throughout the school system and not only in elementary schools and classrooms with significant Aboriginal student populations. Although employing more Aboriginal educators is certainly one way to increase exposure and change attitudes, the hurdles faced by Aboriginal educators are enormous. Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs are often seen as second rate and as providing unfair access to the profession. Like participants in many other affirmative action programs, participants in Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs are seen as privileged and given opportunities not available to the general population. Countering

these perceptions will be a slow and tedious task, but as more Aboriginal educators enter the system and more students are taught by Aboriginal teachers, the process will be started. Aboriginal students with strong role models will begin to see teaching as a career option and new ideas and attitudes can enter the schools.

### **English literature and critical theory**

Although important attributes in any teacher include understanding the systemic racism that supports the power structures of our society and being able to reflect on personal identity narratives, an English Language Arts teacher also needs a solid grounding in diverse English literatures and language. Shannon's and Kate's university educations had prepared them for teaching this literature, but in my experience, not all English teachers are comfortable or even familiar with Commonwealth, Postcolonial, or Aboriginal literatures. Frequently students choose courses based on their notions of cultural capital, picking courses such as Shakespeare and the Romantic poets because they have been taught to understand and value these literatures. Most students will have taken one course in Canadian literature and those courses are necessarily general and broad, resulting in minimal if any exposure to Aboriginal literature. It is now possible to enroll in Aboriginal literature courses at some Canadian universities, and it is likely that increased opportunities will lead to increased interest. A few students will have studied postcolonial literature and most will have had at least a cursory introduction to literary theory. Increasing student exposure to postcolonial and Aboriginal texts and the accompanying interpretive strategies will better prepare them for introducing these literatures in their secondary classrooms. Spivak (1993) suggests "that a general

acquaintance with the landmarks of world literature outside of Euramerica should be part of the general undergraduate requirement” (p. 276). Spivak proposes a

One-semester senior seminar...utilizing the resources of the Asian, Latin American, Pacific, [Aboriginal] and African studies, in conjunction with the creative writing programs where the student is made to share the difficulties and triumphs of translation. There is nothing that would fill out an English major better than a sense of the limits of this exquisite and supple language. (p. 276)

Exposure to a diversity of literature and Englishes would also help in understanding how literature grows out of place and authors use language as resistance and liberation. As hooks (1994) indicates, “Standard English is not the speech of exile. It is the language of conquest and domination;... it is the mask which hides the loss of so many tongues, all those sounds of diverse, native communities we will never hear” (p. 168). An education such as this would prepare teacher candidates for the decolonized classroom.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations arise from the experience of all three participant researchers engaged in the study documented in this dissertation:

- Curricular implementation and delivery
  - Develop and deliver workshops designed to familiarize secondary English Language Arts teachers with Aboriginal literature.
  - Develop and deliver workshops designed to familiarize secondary English Language Arts teachers with critical theory.
  - Develop and distribute bibliographies of Aboriginal literature suitable for secondary English studies.

- Develop and distribute sample units that focus on Aboriginal literature.
- Include the purchase of Aboriginal literature in budgetary planning.
- Pre-service teacher education
  - Increase teacher candidates' exposure to cross-cultural and anti-racist experiences and methodologies.
  - Recruit teacher candidates with a predisposition to social justice issues.
  - Mandate courses in critical theory and Postcolonial and Aboriginal literature as admission requirements for the secondary English Language Arts teaching area.
  - Increase the number of Aboriginal teacher candidates at all grade levels.

## **Methodology**

When I consider my methodological approaches, I have to conclude that interdisciplinarity is, in and of itself, a methodology, one inherently familiar to good teachers. The difficulty in describing an interdisciplinary approach is determining which methodologies were consciously selected and why. As a classroom teacher, I used a variety of approaches to meet the needs of my students and reach my educational objectives. Some of my choices were unconscious, a result of my accidental apprenticeship. Still others were unconscious acts of inspired genius or serendipitous good luck. At other times I deliberately selected strategies or decided to implement new strategies that were introduced through literature or workshops. What I came to realize

was important in the process was my conscious reflection on my approaches and my interrogation of their purpose and result.

This examination of teaching strategies indirectly led me to this research and my quest to contribute to the decolonization of the secondary English classroom. Did I know that was my quest when I began this project? No. At that time I was looking for a way to engage Inuit students with literature because I recognized the disconnection between their world and the worlds represented in the school canon. In the six years since I first began consciously exploring this question, I have gained deeper understandings of power structures and the ways in which they are supported by schooling and curricula. I began the research with lofty hopes of revolutionizing the way English was taught in the high school and ended by realizing that few people were interested in the revolution. My teacher participants, however, were and are interested in changing the world and will continue to work with purpose.

Just as I needed to examine the teaching strategies I used, I needed to consciously examine the methodological approaches I used in this research. Only after years of teaching did I have the self-awareness to engage in that depth of reflection concerning my teaching, and I assume that with distance my reflections on this research will become clearer. However, I do believe that the interdisciplinary approach provided access to a range of appropriate methodologies. I entered the teaching profession after completing graduate work in English literature, and my teaching of literature reflected my interpretive training. As I became aware of Postcolonial and Aboriginal literatures, I also became aware of my interpretive limitations, so this research began in the English



department as I familiarized myself with recent critical theories, satisfying the first goal of this research project: to explore contemporary theories of literary criticism relevant to the study of Aboriginal literature, including an approach through colonial and post-colonial discourse and the growing body of theory and criticism written by North American Aboriginals.

I then needed to consider the ways in which those theories could be used in classrooms where I believed they would make a difference in students' understandings of the world, leading me to my second and third goals: to incorporate literary theory and pedagogical knowledge of content into the development of Aboriginal literature units; and to incorporate the new interpretive and pedagogical understandings into the practices of two secondary English teachers using North American Aboriginal literature in their classrooms. My experience with research had been limited to the types of text-based research favoured by English academics and a small exercise in action research using my own classroom and practice as a research site. Because I saw the introduction of interpretive lenses as emancipatory, I chose action research as the methodology that would shape the research study. Because of the limitations of time and the complications of conducting research in other people's classrooms, the imagined research and the actual research were very different. When asked what surprised me the most about this project, I had to confess its messiness. I had imagined something tidier that stayed within the parameters I had imagined and where the findings would prove my hypothesis. Instead, I was left making sense of the experiences of two teachers and over forty students, and I made unanticipated discoveries. I was not prepared for the racist attitudes expressed by the students or the level of non-compliance my participants identified in their peers. In

this sense, the interdisciplinary approach was valuable for it allowed me to move in many directions and consider other methodological options. At one point, I felt life history could be an important approach, but as I collected and analyzed data, its significance diminished; the current classroom experiences of the participants became the central focus. Through the course of the research, I came to describe what I was doing as a hybrid methodology. In the geneticist's laboratory, a hybrid may be constructed with precision; in the field, the hybrid is a result of conscious and unconscious choices.

### **Further Research Possibilities**

My research took place in the classrooms of two English Language Arts teachers, both of whom taught in schools that could easily be considered representative of the dominant culture. Although Kate taught in a school that had a large Aboriginal population, her classroom did not reflect that demographic and, in many ways, had a student population similar to Shannon's classroom. The effectiveness of using the lenses of contemporary critical theory to interpret Aboriginal literature needs to be explored in other contexts. What might this research look like if it took place in an urban Aboriginal high school or in a grade twelve class in an Aboriginal band-controlled school? Would the findings change if the English class was web-based? How would students in remote northern communities respond to this approach? Another related question also arises. We are currently in an era of accountability and standardized testing. How will teachers, in this climate, deal with issues of assessment? How will this climate impact the inclusion of minority literatures in English Language Arts classrooms? The scope of this research project was necessarily narrow, but the results indicate the potential of using theoretical

lenses as interpretive tools. Research needs to be conducted in a diversity of classrooms to determine the potential of this approach as teachers and students look for ways to expand their understandings of Aboriginal literature.

### **Locating the Inukshuk in the Landscape**

Although an inukshuk may be a solitary sentinel on the Arctic landscape, historically, it was never placed without relationship to its geographic context. As I constructed this literary inukshuk, I drew on the expertise of other scholars, the willing involvement of my participants and their students, and the assistance of my advisors and committee members. This inukshuk was built using the ideas of many, and it does not stand alone on the literary landscape. Other scholars interested in Aboriginal education have also been constructing inuksuit and together our individual research continues to lead to further understandings and the foundational stones for new research possibilities.

During the last decade, numerous academics have concerned themselves with the decolonization of educational practices, each constructing or contributing to the construction of an inukshuk. The increasing interest in Aboriginal education has seen increased communication and cooperation among academics situated in New Zealand, Australia, and the Americas. Although the contexts are varied, many of the concerns are similar, and increasing global awareness of Aboriginal issues has contributed to new understandings of the impact of colonial education and efforts to decolonize educational practices. Many of these efforts have been initiated by Aboriginal educators and researchers or by concerned individuals working in conjunction with Aboriginal groups.

Marie Battiste (1995, 2000a, 2000b), a Mi'kmaq academic with an extensive research and publication history, has organized conferences and edited several essay collections on Aboriginal education in Canadian and international contexts. The essays published in *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds* (1995) examine the issues in Canadian Aboriginal education. Aboriginal educators such as Eber Hampton, Willie Ermine, and Shirley Sterling reflect on their educational experiences and their vision for the future of Aboriginal education. Academics such as Celia Haig-Brown, Robert Regnier, and Arlene Stairs consider some of the recent initiatives in Aboriginal education.

As she considers the cognitive imperialism of the Eurocentric school system and how inner consciousness is devalued, Battiste (2000a) calls for a reworking of curriculum that will “reflect a historical and cultural balance” and counter the “hegemony of dominant Eurocentric knowledge, values, and expectations” (p. 91). Battiste calls for more Aboriginal educators and more educators who are willing to participate in the decolonization process. Battiste (2000b) reiterates her understandings and furthers her argument by challenging the dominated and the dominators to work together in the decolonization process. She identifies Indigenous education as “not one site of struggle but multiple struggles in multiple sites” (p. xxi). Battiste does not see declarations of guilt as useful, but rather calls researchers and educators “to explore the paradigmatic power of Western conceptions and to interrogate their function as normative categories in colonization” (p. xxvii). Battiste challenges postcolonial educators to “transform education from its cognitive imperialistic roots to an enlightened and decolonized process that embraces and accepts diversity as normative” (xxix). Ultimately, decolonized

education recognizes the autonomy of diverse voices and takes the time to listen respectfully to the stories.

Research into the decolonization of Indigenous education is not limited to Canada but is becoming increasingly global, of concern to Americans, New Zealanders, and Australians. Catherine McConaghy draws on her experiences as an adult educator in an Indigenous community in Australia's Northern Territory. Her experiences in this landscape, similar to my experiences in the Inuit landscape, caused her to question the appropriateness of Eurocentric education in this context. Battiste and McConaghy, together with other stakeholders and researchers are connecting the stories situated in specific geographic sites and providing new understandings of Indigenous education

Stories link and give meaning to the inuksuit scattered over the landscape. For centuries the Inuit have balanced rocks on top of each other as a physical manifestation and reminder of the stories of a place. Over time, some of these stories have been lost while others survive as narratives of place. Each researcher and educator concerned with decolonizing educational practices adds their narrative to the inuksuit for the stones continue to remind us of the stories, whether they be narratives of frustration, struggle, disappointment, enlightenment, or success. Ultimately, each inukshuk connects us to this place.

## **Reconsidering My Place in the Landscape**

When I began this research journey, I was filled with idealism and optimism, hoping that I was about to revolutionize the teaching of English. Well, maybe not revolutionize, but at least bring about changes that would make the world a kinder, gentler place with space for all. As I write this, I realize that the world has changed and most of those changes were not precipitated by my actions. We are now in a post 9/11 era where our collective suspicions of those who are different have increased exponentially. We live in a world dominated by fear and anger; our world has become narrower and more confining as a result. 2005 ended with hostage takings in Iraq and suicide bombings in Afghanistan, street shootings in Toronto, and an inquiry into the death of Neil Stonechild. Millions of people make their homes in refugee camps, the victims of natural and human-made disasters. Global warming threatens the traditional way of life of the Inuit and their narratives of the land are no longer accurate predictors of wildlife migration and weather. And I wonder, is there still a place for idealism and optimism? And yet I know that there is, that perhaps idealism and optimism are more necessary now than they were when I began. And I realize that although I may have not revolutionized the teaching of English, I did bring about small changes in the lives of students and teachers.

The students who were members of the participating classrooms were challenged to reconsider how they looked at the Aboriginal people in their communities as they attempted to reconcile their understandings of the literature with their community narratives. Shannon and Kate gained confidence in their abilities to teach Aboriginal literature and work toward new understandings of social justice. Kate continued on her

journey of claiming her Métis identity and ensuring that her daughter was not ashamed of her ancestry. Shannon welcomed the opportunities to teach with passion and conviction. Both teachers found a small, supportive community of other educators who believed that change was possible and that social justice issues belonged in the classroom. As I look back over the history of this project, I see the small changes; I also realize that the biggest change occurred in the ways in which I understand the landscape of the Saskatchewan English Language Arts classroom and my place in it.

An inukshuk marks a fixed location on the landscape; it may point to other places, but it is not the end of the journey. As I constructed this literary inukshuk, I began to realize that the person who began its construction was not the same person who laid the last stone, and the time to move to a new location had come. The narrative of this inukshuk, however, would not be complete without some reflection on my changed perceptions of my location.

Decolonization is a difficult process, and I have had to consider my role in the process of colonization and in decolonization. Several years ago, I had a conversation with an Aboriginal professor concerning my educational experiences in the Arctic and my desire to counter the colonial attitudes of my peers. Her response challenged my understanding of my position: my involvement in the educational system meant that I was part of the colonizing process. I had never considered that perspective and have pondered my role often in the ensuing years.

In *Distant Relations: How my Family Colonized America*, Victoria Freeman (2000) traces her family's history and their relationships and encounters with Aboriginal North Americans. Through her research, she came to understand the importance of family narratives and "was struck by the amnesia of each generation: our family memories often went back only as far as our grandparents" (p. xvii). Freeman associates this loss of memory with the loss of place and sees familial memories being replaced by state memories. Eurocentric concepts of time and narrative are linear and have a vanishing point, whereas North American Aboriginals see time and narrative as circular, where "memory has been absolutely essential as a means of cultural survival" (p. xviii). Like Freeman, I do not "feel guilty in the sense of personally responsible for what happened before I was born or for what other family members have done, but I do feel connected to these events" (p. 450). Freeman began her project because she needed to understand her sense of guilt; I began my project because I wanted Aboriginal students to hear their people's voices in the English classroom. In the process, I have begun to reconsider my family narratives in the light of colonial enterprises and places of resistance and realize that my narrative is no longer linear. I must circle back to understand my family's cultural survival and ensure that our narratives recognize our participation in the colonization of Canada. The inuksuit I leave on the landscape need to mark my participation in decolonization and social justice issues; they bind me to this place I call home.

Taima<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Taima is the Inuktitut word the storyteller uses to mark the end of a story. While it signifies the end of a story, it can also be used to indicate new beginnings as in "Stop. Enough! Let's move on..." The musical duo TAIMA use the word to "represent the actions of a people who takes the future into its own hands –



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and who builds a society that cherishes native tradition while embracing the useful aspects of 'White' culture... TAIMA is a bridge, it's a dialogue." (<http://www.taimaproject.com/english/intro.shtml>)

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## APPENDIX A

### Saskatchewan English Language Arts Curriculum (1999)

#### Indian and Métis Content, Perspectives, and Resources

*Saskatchewan Education recognizes that the Indian and Métis peoples of the province are historically unique peoples, occupying a unique and rightful place in society today. Saskatchewan Education recognizes that education programs must meet the needs of Indian and Métis students, and that changes to existing programs are also necessary for the benefit of all students (Indian and Métis Education Policy from Kindergarten to Grade Twelve, Saskatchewan Education, 1995).*

The inclusion of Indian and Métis content, perspectives, and resources promotes the development of positive attitudes in all students toward Indian and Métis peoples. Increasing an awareness of one's own culture and the cultures of others develops students' self-concepts, promotes an appreciation of Canada's cultural mosaic, and supports universal human rights. The inclusion of Indian and Métis content, perspectives, and resources in each curricular area fosters meaningful and culturally relevant experiences for Indian and Métis students. Teachers working with Aboriginal students must recognize that these students come from various cultural backgrounds and social settings including northern, rural, and urban areas. The language abilities of Indian and Métis students range from fluency in an Indian language, to degrees of bilingualism in an Indian language and English, to fluency in English. Teachers must understand and respect this diversity and use a variety of teaching strategies to assist Aboriginal students with English language development.

Teachers are encouraged to utilize a variety of teaching strategies that build upon their Indian and Métis students' existing knowledge of language and further extend their English language abilities. Knowledge of cross-cultural education, language acquisition theory, and second language teaching strategies will all assist teachers in meeting the needs of individual students. It is crucial to use a variety of instructional, motivational, and assessment approaches that are sensitive to the range of Indian and Métis cultural values and ways of communicating.

Indian and Métis students in Secondary Level English language arts programs are in the process of becoming young adults. All facets of their identities, including their cultural identities, need to be reinforced and extended in order for them to maintain a positive sense of themselves, experience success in school, and graduate as articulate and literate citizens. Secondary Level Indian and Métis students continue to grapple with the complex factors at work in identity formation--gender, family, religion, socioeconomic factors, and the nature of one's membership in society and the global community. The issues around identity for Indian and Métis students can be further complicated by the negative attitudes and perceptions they sometimes encounter in society at large. This can

result in a serious loss of self-esteem and motivation to succeed in school. Teachers should recognize and counter these negative effects on identity and self-concept through anti-racist teaching strategies. Teachers should also affirm all students' cultural backgrounds and social environments, and foster personally meaningful and culturally identifiable experiences for Indian and Métis students.

All Saskatchewan teachers must integrate accurate and appropriate Indian and Métis content and perspectives in their English language arts program. Teachers have a responsibility to choose resources carefully and teach all students to recognize and discuss bias and stereotyping. Guidelines in *Diverse Voices: Selecting Equitable Resources for Indian and Métis Education* (Saskatchewan Education, 1992) can assist teachers and students in selecting resources and understanding forms of bias in resources that inaccurately portray Indian and Métis peoples. The document can help teachers plan classroom experiences that will effectively increase awareness of such bias and develop students' oracy, literacy, and critical thinking abilities. Suggested Indian and Métis resources are included in the sample unit of this curriculum, as well as in bibliographies developed by Saskatchewan Education.

It is important that the English language arts curriculum and classroom resources:

- reflect the legal, cultural, political, social, economic, and regional diversity of Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples
- concentrate on positive and accurate images of Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples
- reinforce and complement the beliefs and values of Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples
- include resources by Aboriginal authors whenever possible
- include historical and contemporary issues.

(<http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/ela102030/core.html#indian>)

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Protocol for initial teacher interview**

1. Tell me about your school community.
2. Describe your classroom.
3. Describe a typical English class.
4. Tell me about your philosophy of teaching.
5. Describe the strategies you use to interpret a text.
6. How do your students usually approach a literary text?
7. Can you tell me about specific interpretive strategies that are used successfully by your students?
8. Tell me about the literary works that have resonated well with your students.
9. Tell me about works of literature that have been met with resistance.
10. Why are you interested in this research study and what do you hope to gain through participation?

## APPENDIX C

### Glossary of Literary Critical Theories

**Criticism-** The term used to describe studies concerned with interpreting works of literature. Critical Theories provide a framework for the interpretation of literature. A literary theory can be described as a lens because each theory focuses on a different human experience allowing the reader to see the work in a different way.

**Archetypal Criticism-** Archetypes are recurrent patterns of images or events that appear throughout mythology and literature. Creation stories are a good example of an archetype. Archetypal criticism is a method of using these archetypes to derive meaning from the text. This approach is sometimes called Jungian Criticism because the theory of archetypes was developed by Carl Jung, a student of Freud.

This theoretical approach gained widespread use during the 1950s and 1960s. Prominent practitioners were Maud Bodkin, Robert Graves, and Joseph Campbell. Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* is an important work in the development of this critical theory.

**Formalism/New Criticism-** Formalism interprets literature by using only the reality of the text and ignoring the personal response of the reader or the author's intentions. Sometimes this is referred to as a close reading.

Formalism developed in the 1920s in Russia while New Criticism developed during the same time period in America. The Europeans applied the science of linguistics to their literary analyses while the Americans performed detailed textual analysis. Leading critics include Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.

**Reader-Response Criticism-** Reader-response emphasizes the reader's personal experience with the text and his/her intellectual interaction with the text and the author. The meaning of the text is the creation of the reader.

Reader response theory came into prominence during the 1960s. Rooted in the works of Louise Rosenblatt, this theory was further developed by Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, and David Bleich.

**Socio-historical and Biographical Criticism-** Socio-historical criticism claims that to understand a literary work, you must understand the society in which it was written. Biographical criticism claims that an understanding of the author's life is necessary to fully comprehend a literary work. These two critical lenses are often used together.

These are often classed as traditional critical theories.

**Marxist Criticism-** The focus here is on class struggle or economic factors as motivation for character action and reaction.

Marxism emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century from the writings of Marx and Engels. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various critics applied their theories to the study of literature. The Hungarian Georg Lukás, the French critic Louis Althusser, and the Italian Antonio Gramsci are key in the development of this theoretical approach.

**Feminist Criticism-** The goal of feminist criticism is to examine the ways in which women's points of view, values, and concerns are given voice and the ways in which patriarchal views of the world are supported in the texts.

Feminist criticism came into prominence during the late 1960s. Key writers include Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Julia Kristeva, Audre Lorde, and Kate Millett.

**Psychoanalytical Criticism-** The application of Freudian theory to the study of literature. These critics usually look to uncover material that is not consciously present in the mind of the author.

This theoretical approach was developed by Jacques Lacan and gained prominence in the 1970s. Lacan influenced a great number of theorists.

**Postcolonial Criticism-** This critical approach looks at the effects of European colonialism by studying the literatures of former colonies. This approach focuses on the reshaping of the English language and the relationships between the colonial centre and the colonies or periphery. Common terms used are centre and periphery, othering, and marginalization.

Postcolonialism grew out of earlier theories of Commonwealth Literature and Third World studies and gained prominence in the 1970s. Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak are early theorists. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin applied postcolonialism to all cultures affected by the imperial process.

**Aboriginal Criticism-** Aboriginal critical theory grows out of Aboriginal literature and furthers the intent of postcolonial theory. This theoretical perspective looks at the effect of colonialism and settler colonization on Aboriginal peoples and their attempts to resist

or decolonize. The place of community, the oral tradition, and political activism are important.

Aboriginal critical theory is currently emerging and grows out of the study of North American Aboriginal literature. Craig Womack, Kimberley Blaaser, and Helen Hoy currently work in this area.

**Sources:**

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## APPENDIX D

### Ethics Approval



#### UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

<http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics.shtml>

**NAME:** Angela Ward (Geraldine Balzer)  
Curriculum Studies

**BSC#:** 03-1285

**DATE:** December 4, 2003

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the Application for Ethics Approval for your study "Reading Aboriginal Literature through the Lenses of Contemporary Critical Theory" (03-1285).

1. Your study has been APPROVED.
2. Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Committee consideration in advance of its implementation.
3. The term of this approval is for 1 year.
4. This approval is valid for one year. A status report form must be submitted annually to the Chair of the Committee in order to extend approval. This certificate will automatically be invalidated if a status report form is not received within one month of the anniversary date. Please refer to the website for further instructions  
<http://www.usask.ca/research/behavrsc.shtml>

I wish you a successful and informative study.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "David Hay".

Dr. David Hay, Acting Chair  
University of Saskatchewan  
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

DH/ck

**Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan**  
Room 1607, 110 Gymnasium Place, Box 5000 RPO University, Saskatoon SK S7N 4J8 CANADA  
Telephone: (306) 966-8576 Facsimile: (306) 966-8597  
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## **APPENDIX E**

### **Letter to School Boards**

Department of Curriculum Studies  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan

December 16, 2003

I am currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Saskatchewan and have received funding from the Stirling McDowell Foundation to conduct my research. With your permission and her consent, I wish to work with (name) at (school). (name) has been approached and is interested in participating in the study.

My research will focus on the experiences of two secondary English Language Arts teachers who implement a critical lens approach to the teaching of Aboriginal Literature in their classrooms. The research seeks to find ways to teach this literature, part of the Saskatchewan curriculum, in ways that honour and respect the literature and the traditions of the authors.

The research will involve conversational interviews with the teachers, meetings to plan the implementation and revision of the unit, and observations of the teacher in the classroom setting. Through the McDowell Foundation grant, I have received funding for five release days for each teacher. These release days will be used to plan the research and conduct the interviews. In addition, I will be observing the teacher in the classroom. Please note that no data will be collected on the students in the classroom.

Pseudonyms will be used for the school and the teacher and every effort will be made to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. The school board will be supplied with a copy of the research report.

Permission to conduct this research has been granted by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board on December 4, 2003. A copy of the letter of permission is appended.

Should you have any questions concerning the research, please feel free to contact my supervisors or me.

Geraldine Balzer  
966-7571

Angela Ward  
373-9769

Susan Gingell  
966-5510

Yours sincerely,  
Geraldine Balzer



## APPENDIX F

### Request for Informed Consent of Teacher

“Reading Aboriginal Literature Through the Lenses of Contemporary Critical Theory”

1. Researcher: Geraldine Balzer  
Department of Curriculum Studies  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
966-7571  
880-9605
2. It is my understanding that this study’s objects are to develop, refine, and explore the instructional strategy of critical lenses in the teaching of Aboriginal literature in the secondary classroom.
3. I understand that, although not guaranteed, the possible benefit of this study might include improving understanding of:
  - Cross-cultural education
  - The development of critical skills in the interpretation of literature
  - The honouring and respecting of Aboriginal literature
  - The engagement of culturally marginalized students.
4. It is my understanding that the initial meeting will include an interview about my understandings of teaching literature and how literary criticism currently functions in the classroom. I will be involved in a research project that uses elements of action research to design, implement, and revise a unit of study in my classroom. I understand that I will be involved in conversational interviews with the researcher and with the other participant. I understand that the researcher and I will determine the number of times that the researcher will visit my classroom.
5. I understand that there are no foreseeable risks to myself as a participant.
6. I understand that I may refuse to answer individual questions and that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time. If I withdraw from this study, my data will be deleted from the study and destroyed. In the case that my involvement is discontinued by the researcher, my data will be deleted from the study and destroyed.
7. I understand that I will be audio-taped during the interview process; I understand I have the right to turn off the tape recorder at any time. I understand that the tapes will be transcribed and that I will be required to read the transcriptions. As I read the transcriptions, I understand that I have the right to change or delete any of my comments.

8. It is my understanding that to protect my confidentiality and anonymity, I will be assigned a pseudonym. I understand that the tapes and transcripts of our individual and group discussions will be stored in a secure place by the principal investigator, Geraldine Balzer, until the completion of the study. From this time on, Dr. Angela Ward will store the data in a locked office at the University of Saskatchewan for five years. After that time the recordings will be destroyed.
9. I understand that the data collected in this study will be used for the formation of a thesis. Data collection and interpretations from this study will most likely be used in conference presentation, journal articles, and other similar publications. It is my understanding that direct quotations may be used in the writings.
10. I understand that I will be advised of any new information that will have a bearing on my decision to continue the study.
11. I understand that the final results of this study will be shared with me in its entirety.
12. I understand that the research has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee for Ethics in Behavioral Sciences and Research, and that if I have any questions regarding my rights as a participant, these may be addressed to the office of the Research services at 966-2084.
13. This study was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board on December 4, 2003.
14. I understand that if I have any questions regarding this study or my rights as a participant in the research, I may contact:

Office of Research Services  
966-2084

Geraldine Balzer  
Student Researcher  
966-7571  
[geraldineb@canoemail.com](mailto:geraldineb@canoemail.com)

Dr. Angela Ward  
Research Co-supervisor  
373-9769  
[angela.ward@usask.ca](mailto:angela.ward@usask.ca)

Dr. Susan Gingell  
Research Co-supervisor  
966-5510  
[susan.gingell@usask.ca](mailto:susan.gingell@usask.ca)

15. The study and contents of the consent form have been explained to me. I understand the contents, and I understand that I will be receiving a copy of this consent form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Researcher's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

## APPENDIX G

### Data/Transcript Release Form

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

I appreciate your participation in my research study. I have made a written transcription of our interview. I am returning the transcriptions for your perusal and the release of confidential information. I will adhere to the following guidelines which are designed to protect your confidentiality and interests in the study.

1. Would you please read and recheck the transcripts for accuracy of information. You may add to or clarify the transcripts to say what you intended to mean or include additional comments that will be your words. You may also delete any information that you may not want to be quoted in the study.
2. The interpretations from this study will be used in a thesis and scholarly journal articles or other similar publications and presentations. You will be represented by a pseudonym in the thesis and in all publications and presentations.
3. In accordance with the University of Saskatchewan Guidelines on Behavioral Ethics, the recordings and transcriptions made during the study will be kept in a locked file until the study is complete. The tapes and transcripts will be stored in a secure place by the principal investigator, Geraldine Balzer, until the completion of the study. From this time on, Dr. Angela Ward will store the data in a locked office at the University of Saskatchewan for five years. After that time the recordings will be destroyed.
4. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. If this happens, the tape recordings and interview data will not be used.

#### AUTHORIZATION OF RELEASE

“I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said on \_\_\_\_\_ in my personal interview with Geraldine Balzer. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Geraldine Balzer to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.”

#### SIGNATURES

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Geraldine Balzer  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX H

### Letter to Parents and Students

Department of Curriculum Studies  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan

February 25, 2004

Dear Parents and Students,

I am a Ph.D candidate at the University of Saskatchewan and have received permission from the university and the school board to conduct research in Ms Paul's English classroom.

I will be observing the teacher and collecting data on the strategies she uses for teaching English literature. The teacher and I will work closely together in order to plan my classroom visits. I will be visiting the classroom weekly for a three month period.

My observations will be focused on the teacher. However, we may wish to use copies of student work in the final report. Should we decide to include student work, students and parents will be approached individually for signed consent. Pseudonyms will be used to guarantee the anonymity of the student. There will be no repercussions if students do not wish to have their work included.

Should you have any questions concerning this research study, please contact the Office of Research Services, my supervisors, or me.

Office of Research Services  
966-2084

Geraldine Balzer  
Student Researcher  
966-7571  
[geraldineb@canoemail.com](mailto:geraldineb@canoemail.com)

Dr. Angela Ward  
Research Co-supervisor  
373-9769  
[angela.ward@usask.ca](mailto:angela.ward@usask.ca)

Dr. Susan Gingell  
Research Co-supervisor  
966-5510  
[susan.gingell@usask.ca](mailto:susan.gingell@usask.ca)

Yours sincerely,

Geraldine Balzer

## APPENDIX I

### Consent for the Release of Student Work

“Reading Aboriginal Literature Through the Lenses of Contemporary Critical Theory”

16. Researcher: Geraldine Balzer  
Department of Curriculum Studies  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
966-7571  
880-9605
17. I understand that my classroom teacher has participated in a research study and has recommended that copies of excerpts of my work be included in the study. I understand that the original works will be retained by the teacher or me.
18. I understand that the data collected in this study will be used for the formation of a thesis. Data collection and interpretations from this study will likely be used in conference presentations, journal articles, and other similar publications.
19. I also understand that I will be given a pseudonym so that I may not be identified by outside readers.
20. I understand that I may refuse inclusion of my work should I so wish. I will not be penalized in anyway should I refuse the inclusion of my work.
21. The study and contents of the consent have been explained to me. I understand the contents, and I understand that I will be receiving a copy of this consent form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Parent's Signature) (if under 18)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Researcher's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

